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EACH VOLUME INDEXED AND SOLD SEPARATELY.



VOL. I. Era of Colonization, 1492-1689

Published 1897

VOL. II. Building of the Republic, 1689-1783

Published 1898

VOL. III. National Expansion, 1783-1845

Published 1900

VOL. IV. Welding of the Nation, 1845-1900

WITH GENERAL INDEX *Published 1901*



BY THE SAME EDITOR

A Source-Book of American History

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THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

66 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK

American History told by
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VOLUME I

ERA OF COLONIZATION

1492-1689



THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
NEW YORK BOSTON CHICAGO DALLAS
ATLANTA SAN FRANCISCO

MACMILLAN & CO., LIMITED
LONDON BOMBAY CALCUTTA
MELBOURNE

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
OF CANADA, LIMITED
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American History told by Contemporaries

VOLUME I

ERA OF COLONIZATION

1492-1689

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NEW YORK

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

LONDON MACMILLAN & CO., LTD.

1931

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Set up and electrotyped Published May, 1897

Preface

A GENIAL reviewer has said of a book intended to aid students to a convenient use of the material of American history "they hausmannize the wilderness that their students may sip coffee in an ample boulevard." This work likewise aims to make broad the highways for those who would visit their forefathers. It is an attempt to combine two objects not easily harmonized . first, to put within convenient reach of schools, libraries, and scholars authoritative texts of rare or quant writings in American history, contemporary with the events which they describe , and, in the second place, to give, in a succession of scenes, a notion of the movement and connection of the history of America, so that from this work by itself may be had an impression of the forces which have shaped our history, and the problems upon which they have worked. The limitations of space, however, make it imperative to clip and gouge most of the pieces selected , and explanations and connections must be omitted . Nevertheless the author believes sincerely that a half-loaf baked in the oven of the times, is better than all the spiced buns of modern writers, for carrying to the mind a flavor of the life which our ancestors lived, and the motives which guided them , he hopes that the reader may find in these lively, human, brief extracts, the real spirit of his countrymen.

A few words should be said on the principles of selection and arrangement . First of all, pains have been taken to use the first authoritative edition of each work in English , and a faithful translation of pieces in foreign languages. Next, the copy is meant to be exact. A mighty historian like Sparks may correct the spelling and grammar of his ancestors , lesser men had better leave the corrections to the reader.

Words not easily recognized are, however, repeated in modern dress in brackets. Next, the quotations are meant to be exact, all omissions being indicated, and the place where the extract was found being noted at the end.

No effort has been made to select writers especially for their literary value, and where there are two equally credible authorities on the same subject, that one is usually chosen who does not appear elsewhere in the volume. Nevertheless, no reader can fail to admire the literary crispness and sparkle of men like John Smith, William Bradford, John Hammond, Sir William Berkeley, Gabriel Thomas, and Dankers and Sluyter. There has not been space for long accounts of the writers, such as will be found in Tyler's *History of American Literature*, and in the introductions to special editions, but a few words are prefixed on each person, and a few references are added intended to lead to other sources, and to secondary works.

In making up this volume the difficulty has not been to find suitable extracts, but to choose out of the wealth of material, doubtless much has been left out that would have been as interesting as anything which here appears. It is the editor's hope, however, that nothing has been admitted that has not a distinct significance, and that as many elements of Colonial history are here presented as the space allows.

The uses to which such a volume may be put in schools and elsewhere are set forth at large in the *Practical Introduction* below. The editor's thought is that it may be an adjunct to the regular text-book teaching, may serve as material for topical study, and may open up to readers the field of delightful narratives in which American history abounds. Almost no constitutional documents are included they are to be found in many collections, and they have not the persuasive power of the writings addressed by men to men.

An acknowledgment is due to the Harvard College Library for its generous grant of special privileges without which the book could hardly have been prepared.

ALBERT BUSHNELL HART.

Contents

PART I

PRACTICAL INTRODUCTION FOR TEACHERS, LIBRARIES, AND STUDENTS

CHAPTER I—THE SOURCES

	PAGE
1. What are Sources?	1
2. Educative Value of Sources	2
3. Classification of Sources on Colonization	4
4. Libraries of Sources in Colonial History	8
5. Reprints of Collected Sources	9
6. Select Library of Sources on Colonization	10

CHAPTER II—USE OF SOURCES

7. How to find Colonial Sources	16
8. Use of Sources by Teachers	18
9. Use of Sources by Pupils	19
10. Use of Sources by Students and Investigators	21
11. Use of Sources by Readers	22
12. Use of Sources by Libraries	23
13. Cautions in using Sources	24
14. Use of Secondary Works	25
15. Select List of Secondary Works on Colonization	26

PART II

DISCOVERY AND EARLY VOYAGES, 1000-1600

CHAPTER III—NORSE AND SPANISH DISCOVERIES

16. Hauk Erendsson <i>Norse Discoveries of Greenland and Vineland the Good, about 1000</i> . .	28
17. Christopher Columbus <i>Discovery of America, 1492</i>	35

	PAGE
18. Pope Alexander VI. <i>Papal Bull Dividing the New World, 1493</i>	40
19. Christopher Columbus <i>The Thirst for Gold, 1503</i>	44
20. Martin Waltzee-Muller <i>First Use of the Name America, 1507</i>	49
21. Francisco Lopez de Gómara <i>How Cortez took Montezuma Prisoner, 1519</i>	49
22. Hernando Pizarro <i>The Story of Pizarro's Conquest, 1531</i>	53
23. A Portugall Gentleman of Eluas <i>From the Ocean to the Mississippi, 1539-1542</i>	57
24. Captain Juan Jaramillo <i>First Expedition to Kansas and Nebraska, 1540</i>	60
25. Miles Philips <i>An Englishman in Mexico, 1568</i>	65

CHAPTER IV—ENGLISH DISCOVERIES

26. Lorenzo Pasqualigo and Raimondo di Soncino <i>John Cabot and the First English Voyage to America, 1497</i>	69
27. Anonymous <i>First Printed Account of America in English, 1511</i>	72
28. Richard Hakluyt <i>The First English Slave Trader, 1530</i>	73
29. Sir John Hawkins <i>An English Free-booter's Adventures, 1568</i>	75
30. Francis Pretty <i>The Famous Voyage of Sir Francis Drake about the Whole Globe, 1577-1580</i>	81
31. Sir Francis Drake <i>The Piety of a Sea Rover, 1578</i>	88
32. Captain Arthur Barlowe <i>First Voyage to Virginia, 1584</i>	89
33. Sir Walter Raleigh <i>Expedition to El Dorado, 1595</i>	96

CHAPTER V—FRENCH AND DUTCH DISCOVERIES

34. Captain John Verrazano <i>A Voyage along the Atlantic Coast, 1524</i>	102
35. Captain Jacques Cartier <i>Discovery of the St. Lawrence, 1534-1535</i>	107
36. René Laudonnière <i>A French Huguenot Colony, 1564</i>	119

	PAGE
37 Marc Lescarbot <i>The Myth of Norembege, 1606</i>	118
38 Robert Juet <i>Discovery of the Hudson River, 1607</i>	121
39. Sievr Samuel Champlain <i>Adventures on Lake Champlain, 1609</i>	125
40 Father Isaac Jogues <i>Experiences of a Jesuit Missionary, 1643</i>	129
41. Father Christian Le Clercq <i>The French Government of Canada, 1663</i>	133
42 Father James Marquette <i>Discovery of the Mississippi, 1673</i>	136
43 Father Zenobius Membre <i>La Salle's Exploration of the Mississippi, 1682</i>	140

PART III

CONDITIONS OF COLONIZATION

CHAPTER VI—REASONS FOR COLONIZATION

44 William Harrison <i>The Condition of England, 1577</i>	145
45 Sir George Peckham <i>Advantages of Colonization, 1582</i>	152
46 Richard Hakluyt <i>How Spain may be Abased, 1584</i>	158
47 Edward Hayes <i>First Suggestion of Trans-continental Trade, 1602</i>	161
48 Anonymous <i>The English Claims to North America, 1606</i>	164
49 William Bradford <i>Why the Pilgrims left England for Holland, 1607-1608</i>	167

CHAPTER VII—REGULATION OF COLONIZATION

50 Virginia Company of London <i>Supplies for the Virginia Plantation, 1621</i>	171
51 Council for New England <i>Meetings of a Colonization Company, 1622-1623</i>	175
52. Massachusetts Company <i>How to order a Colony, 1629</i>	178
53 King Charles First <i>An Attempt to sift Emigration, 1637</i>	183
54 King Charles Second <i>Instructions for the Council appointed for Forraigne Plantacôns, 1660</i>	184

CHAPTER VIII — THE EMIGRANTS

	PAGE
55 Reverend John Robinson <i>Advice to Pilgrim Colonists, 1620</i>	187
56 Reverend Francis Higginson <i>A Pious Emigrant Ship, 1629</i>	190
57. Captain Roger Clap <i>How a Settler left England, 1630</i>	195
58 Jasper Dankers and Peter Sluyter <i>A Godless Emigrant Ship, 1679</i>	197

PART IV

THE SOUTHERN COLONIES

CHAPTER IX — CONDITIONS

59 William Strachey <i>An Account of Virginia, 1618</i>	200
60 William Strachey <i>The Indians of the South, 1618</i>	203
61 Governor Sir Thomas Gates <i>Character of the First Colonists, 1610</i>	206

CHAPTER X — VIRGINIA

62 Captain John Smith <i>The Founding of Virginia, 1607</i>	209
63 President Edward Maria Wingfield <i>The Earliest Days of Virginia, 1607</i>	211
64. Raphe Hamor <i>The Tale of Pocahontas, 1613-1614</i>	214
65 John Twine <i>The First Representative Assembly in America, 1619</i>	218
66. Captain Nathaniel Butler <i>"The Dismasking of Virginia," 1622</i>	225
67. Virginia Company <i>Defence of the Virginia Charter, 1623</i>	228
68 Governor Sir William Berkeley <i>Appeal of a Loyal Governor, 1651</i>	233
69 Governor Richard Bennet and others <i>Surrender of Virginia to Parliament, 1652</i>	235
70 Governor Sir William Berkeley <i>An Official Report on Virginia, 1671</i>	237
71 Anonymous <i>Bacon's Rebellion, 1676</i>	242

CHAPTER XI — MARYLAND

	PAGE
72 Cecilius Calvert, Lord Baltimore	
<i>Instructions to Colonists</i> , 1633	247
73 Father Andrew White	
<i>First Impressions of Maryland</i> , 1634	252
74 Claybourne, Baltimore, and the Commissioners of Plantations:	
<i>The Question of Kent Island</i> , 1638	257
75 John Hammond	
<i>Puritan Commotions in Maryland</i> , 1656	262
76 George Alsop	
<i>"A Character of the Province of Mary-Land,"</i> 1666	267
77 William Penn and Charles, Lord Baltimore	
<i>The Quaker and the Nobleman</i> , 1683	272

CHAPTER XII — THE CAROLINAS

78 Lords Proprietors	
<i>"A Declaration & Proposealls to all yt will plant in Carrolina,"</i> 1663	275
79 Thomas Woodward	
<i>Suggestions on Granting Lands</i> , 1665	278
80. Lords Proprietors	
<i>The Fundamental Constitutions Altered</i> , 1682	280
81. Samuel Wilson	
<i>An Account of the Province of Carolina</i> , 1682	283

CHAPTER XIII — SOUTHERN COLONIAL LIFE

82 Robert Rich	
<i>"Newes from Virginia,"</i> 1610	285
83. King James First	
<i>"Restraint of the Disordered Trading of Tobacco,"</i> 1620	288
84 Maryland Assembly	
<i>Toleration in Maryland</i> , 1649	291
85. R G	
<i>Religion in Virginia</i> , 1661	294
86. Reverend Morgan Godwyn	
<i>"Proposals for the Carrying on of the Negro's Christianity,"</i> 1681	298
87 Colonel William Fitzhugh	
<i>Life of a Southern Planter</i> , 1681-1686	301
88 Reverend John Clayton	
<i>The Cultivation of Tobacco</i> , 1686	307
89. Henry Hartwell, James Blair, and Edward Chilton	
<i>"Concerning the College of William and Mary,"</i> 1692	310

PART V

NEW ENGLAND

CHAPTER XIV — CONDITIONS

	PAGE
90. Captain John Smith	
<i>"A Description of New-England,"</i> 1614	313
91. Thomas Lechford	
<i>An Account of the New England Indians,</i> 1642	318
92. Commissioners of the United Colonies of New England, with Pessecus, Aumsequen, and others	
<i>A Typical Indian Treaty,</i> 1645	321
93. John Calvin	
<i>Puritan Principles of Government,</i> 1559	324
94. Reverend John Davenport	
<i>A Defence of Theocracy,</i> 1638	330
95. Governor William Keift	
<i>A Dutch Opinion of New England Character,</i> 1646	334
96. Reverend John Norton	
<i>John Cotton, an Ideal Puritan,</i> 1652	335

CHAPTER XV — PLYMOUTH

97. Governor William Bradford	
<i>Why the Pilgrims left Holland,</i> 1620	340
98. Governor William Bradford	
<i>The Germ of Popular Government,</i> 1620	344
99. Governor William Bradford	
<i>The First Landing at Plymouth,</i> 1620	345
100. Governor William Bradford	
<i>Life in a Pilgrim Commonwealth,</i> 1620-1623	349
101. Governor Edward Winslow	
<i>Conditions of Life in Plymouth,</i> 1621	356
102. Roger White	
<i>Suggestions on the Government of Plymouth,</i> 1625	359
103. Thomas Morton	
<i>"Of the Revells of New Canaan,"</i> 1628	361
104. General Court of New Plymouth	
<i>Impending Annexation by Massachusetts,</i> 1690	363

CHAPTER XVI — EARLY MASSACHUSETTS

105. Captain Edward Johnson	
<i>The Settlement of Massachusetts,</i> 1628-1630	366
106. Sir Richard Saltonstall and others	
<i>The Agreement at Cambridge, England,</i> 1629	371

PAGE

107.	Governor John Winthrop	
	<i>Organization of Representative Government in Massachusetts Bay,</i>	
	1631-1639	373
108	Anonymous	
	<i>The Trial of a Woman Antinomian, 1637</i>	382
109	Lords Commissioners for Foreign Plantations	
	<i>Demand for the Return of the Massachusetts Charter, 1638</i>	387
110	Thomas Lechford	
	<i>"A Note of what things I Mislaked in the Country," 1641</i>	388
111	Robert Child and others	
	<i>A Demand for a Share in the Government, 1646</i>	390
112	Reverend Nathaniel Ward	
	<i>The Simple Cobbler of Agawam against Toleration, 1647</i>	393

CHAPTER XVII—RHODE ISLAND

113	Samuel Gorton	
	<i>Settlement in Rhode Island, 1646</i>	397
114	William Arnold	
	<i>Objections to the New Charter, 1651</i>	401
115	Reverend Roger Williams	
	<i>Toleration in Rhode Island, 1670</i>	402
116	Governor Peleg Sandford	
	<i>Rhode Island in 1680</i>	407

CHAPTER XVIII—CONNECTICUT AND NEW HAVEN

117	William Bradford	
	<i>The English in the Connecticut, 1633</i>	410
118	John Winthrop	
	<i>The Founding of Connecticut, 1636</i>	412
119	Captain Edward Johnson	
	<i>The Foundation of New Haven, 1637</i>	414
120	"A Gentall Cort at Harteford"	
	<i>The First Popular Written Constitution, 1638</i>	415
121	General Court of New Haven	
	<i>Remonstrance against Consolidation, 1663</i>	420
122.	"The Governor and Company" of Connecticut	
	<i>The Struggle with Andros, 1689</i>	423

CHAPTER XIX—NEW HAMPSHIRE AND MAINE

123.	Sagamore Wehanownowitt and others	
	<i>The Indian Grant, 1638</i>	426
124	Commissioners Maverick, Carr, and Cartwright	
	<i>Condition of the Northern Provinces, 1665</i>	428

	PAGE
125. John Josselyn	
<i>"The People in the Province of Main," 1675</i>	47
126 Nathaniel Weare	1
<i>Request to be Joined to Massachusetts, 1690</i>	43

CHAPTER XX—NEW ENGLAND'S DEVELOPMENT

127 Captain John Underhill	
<i>The Pequot War, 1635</i>	439
128 Council for New England	
<i>Reasons for the Surrender of the New England Charter, 1635</i> .	444
129 Commissioners for the United Colonies of New England	
<i>Proceedings of the First American Federation, 1643</i>	447
130 Reverend Peter Bulkeley	
<i>New England's Opinion of Itself, 1651</i>	451
131. General Court of Massachusetts	
<i>The First Nullification of a Federal Act, 1653</i>	452
132 Governor John Endicott	
<i>An Exculpatory Address to King Charles II, 1661</i>	454
133 Edward Randolph	
<i>The Causes and Results of King Philip's War, 1675</i>	458
134 Richard Hutchinson	
<i>The Death of King Philip, 1676</i>	461
135 Reverend President Increase Mather	
<i>The Loss of the Massachusetts Charter, 1684</i>	462
136 Deputy-Governor Thomas Danforth	
<i>The Revolution against Andros, 1689</i>	463

CHAPTER XXI—NEW ENGLAND LIFE

137. Anonymous	
<i>Founding of the First American College, 1636</i>	467
138. Richard Mather, John Eliot, and Thomas Welde	
<i>A Sheaf of Sacred Song, 1640</i>	472
139 Thomas Nowell, Henry Clarke, and others	
<i>A Puritan's Will and Inventory, 1648</i>	477
140 Mary Dyer	
<i>The Justification of a Condemned Quakeress, 1659</i>	479
141 Anonymous	
<i>The Trial of a Quaker, 1661</i>	481
142 Edward Burrough	
<i>The Wrongs of the Quakers, 1660</i>	484
143 County Court of Middlesex	
<i>The Penalty for not Going to Church, 1666</i>	487
144 Records of the General Court	
<i>The True Blue Laws of Connecticut, 1672</i>	488

145	John Josselyn	
28	<i>A Cynical View of New-Englanders</i> , 1674	494
146.	Jaspar Dankers and Peter Sluyter	
26	<i>Two Dutchmen in Boston</i> , 1680	496
147.	Quintin Stockwell	
	<i>A Story of Indian Captivity</i> , 1677-1678	501
148.	Reverend Cotton Mather	
	<i>Career of a Self-made Man</i> , Sir William Phipps, 1656-1690	507
149	Chief Justice Samuel Sewall	
	<i>The Family Life of a Puritan Gentleman</i> , 1692	512

PART VI

MIDDLE COLONIES

CHAPTER XXII—CONDITIONS

150	Directors of the West India Company	
	<i>Services of a Trading Company</i> , 1629	517
151	David Pietersz de Vries	
	<i>A Dutch Trader</i> , 1632-1633	520
152.	Reverend John Megapolensis	
	<i>The Iroquois</i> , 1644	525

CHAPTER XXIII—NEW YORK

153	Nicolas Jean de Wassaenaer	
	<i>Founding of New Amsterdam</i> , 1623-1628	529
154	Junker Adriaen van der Donck and ten others	
	<i>"Of the Reasons and Causes why and how New Netherland is so decayed,"</i> 1650	532
155	Michael Ten Hove	
	<i>Why the Dutch Surrendered New York</i> , 1665	537
156	Governor Thomas Dongan	
	<i>Condition of New York in 1687</i>	542
157	"A Gentleman of the City of New-York"	
	<i>Leisler's Rebellion</i> , 1689-1691	544

CHAPTER XXIV—PENNSYLVANIA AND DELAWARE

158	King Gustavus Adolphus	
	<i>Authorization for a Swedish Colony</i> , 1624	548
159	Andreas Hudde	
	<i>The Swedish Colony</i> , 1645	549

	PAGE
160 Records of New Haven Colony.	
<i>New England Settlers on the Delaware, 1655</i>	551
161. Governor William Penn	
<i>The Infant Colony of Pennsylvania, 1683</i>	554
162. Governor William Penn	
<i>Treaty-making with the Indians, 1683</i>	557
163. Francis Daniel Pastorius	
<i>Germans in Pennsylvania, 1684</i>	559

CHAPTER XXV—NEW JERSEY

164 John Lord Berkeley and Sir George Carteret	
<i>"Concessions and Agreements of the Proprietors of East Jersey," 1665</i> .	563
165 Records of Newark	
<i>Town Meeting in the Province of New Jersey, 1666-1668</i>	566
166 Sir John Werden	
<i>A Sketch of the Complications in New Jersey, 1679</i>	567
167 David Barclay, Arthur Forbes, and Gawen Lawrie.	
<i>An Account of East Jersey, 1684</i>	569
168. Gabriel Thomas	
<i>An Account of West Jersey, 1698</i>	573

CHAPTER XXVI—LIFE IN THE MIDDLE COLONIES

169 Domine Jonas Michaelius.	
<i>A Dutch Clergyman's Experiences, 1628</i>	576
170. Commissioners of the New England Confederation.	
<i>A New England Opinion of the Dutch, 1653</i>	579
71 Secretary Adriaen Hegeman.	
<i>A Schoolmaster's Duties, 1661</i>	585
72. Jaspas Dankers and Peter Sluyter	
<i>Condition of New York in 1679</i>	586

American History told by Contemporaries

PART I

PRACTICAL INTRODUCTION

FOR TEACHERS, PUPILS, STUDENTS AND LIBRARIES

CHAPTER I—THE SOURCES

1. What are Sources?

IN the current discussions on the teaching and study of history, one of the most frequent expressions is "the sources," or "original material." What do these words mean? As history is an account of the past actions of men, every historical statement must go back to the memory of those who saw the events, or to some record made at the time. Tradition is the handing down of memories from one person to another; and one of the most famous of the pieces in this volume—the Norse Sagas on the discovery of America (No. 16)—were thus transmitted for three centuries before they were finally put into writing. Such transmissions are likely to get away from the first form as years go on, and may change into legends. The more exact form of transmitting earlier memories is by autobiography, and by reminiscence written out in later life; and even they are apt to be twisted by the lapse of the years between the event and the making of the record. Hence in preparing this volume such works have been rarely used. Perhaps Edward Johnson's book (No. 105) is the nearest approach to an example.

Much more important are the records and memoranda made at or very near the time of the event. Sometimes silent monuments may be all that is left; the Great Serpent Mound in Ohio is a striking contem-

porary record, — if anybody could interpret it ; and the house of Governor Cradock in Medford, Massachusetts, still stands to tell us that its builder was a man of taste and substance.

Laws, proclamations, and other public documents are sources of a high order, because they not only describe, but constitute the event, they bear the signatures, the affixing of which gives them validity, they are drawn up before the event takes place. An example is the Bull of Alexander VI (No. 18) and the Connecticut laws (No 144) Of greater literary interest are the narratives of explorers, travellers, and visitors, in which American history is rich, an instance is De Vries' trading voyages (No 151). As travellers have, however, a lively sense of the importance of their own impressions, a more valuable kind of source is the contemporary journal, written from day to day during the events described. When written by men who were the helmsmen of a Commonwealth, like John Winthrop (No. 107), they have the highest historical value, for they are forged fresh from the mint, and reveal what even the official records may conceal. Even when written without any expectation of publication, they furnish valuable evidence ; no better example can be found than the Diary of Samuel Sewall, "The Puritan Pepys" (No. 149). The letters of public men, or even of private men, have the same double value of an unvarnished tale, written at the moment, and they also reveal the writer's character. Such are the familiar letters of Colonel Fitzhugh (No 87). More elaborate are the arguments or controversial pamphlets intended for circulation at the time, such as Butler's attack on the Virginia government (No 66), and the accounts of the Andros Revolution (No. 136) Narratives composed immediately after events have passed, like Quentin Stockwell's account of his Indian captivity (No 147) have a sober value,

Historical sources, then, are nothing less nor more than records made at or near the time of the events, described by men who took part in them, and are, therefore, qualified to speak.

2. Educative Value of Sources

LIKE other literature, the office of history is to record, to instruct, and to please. It is a subject which has natural claims on the interest of a student or reader, for it deals with stirring events, with

human character, and with the welfare of the race. There must be in history something to arouse the minds of young and old, and to develop them when aroused. The training element of history as a school subject has been discussed in many places, and a list of references to such discussions appears in Channing and Hart's *Guide to the Study of American History*, § 15. The value of sources, as a part of that study, has long been in the minds of the scholars and antiquarians who have painfully preserved and reprinted the old narratives, but they are less appreciated by the reading or teaching public.

As a record, sources are the basis of history, but not mere raw material like the herbaria of the botanist, or the chemicals of a laboratory, stuffs to be destroyed in discovering their nature, as utterances of men living when they were made, they have in them the breath of human life, history is the biology of human conduct. Nobody can settle any historical question without an appeal to the sources, or without taking into account the character of the actors in history.

Nobody remembers all the history he reads, the bold and striking events seize hold of his mind, and around them he associates the rest. But a source gives that bold and striking event in its most durable form. Volumes about the Iroquois will not tell us so much that we shall remember as Father Jogues' account of their cruelty to him (No. 40).

Hence the instructing power of history goes back in considerable part to the sources. They do not tell all their own story, they need to be arranged and set in order by the historian, who on the solid piers of their assurances spans his continuous bridge of narrative. But there are two sides to history: the outward events in their succession, with which secondary historians alone can deal, and the inner spirit, which is revealed only by the sources. If we could not know both things, it would be better to know how Mary Dyer justified herself for being a Quakeress (No. 140), than how her trial was carried on. The source, therefore, throws an inner light on events, secondary writers may go over them, collate them, compare them, sometimes supplement them, but can never supersede them.

As for entertainment, the narratives of discovery are the Arabian Nights of History for their marvels and adventures. The quiet unassuming tale of the Conquest of the great country of Peru by a handful of Spanish adventurers (No. 22), the story of Pocahontas (No. 64), are part of the world's library of romantic literature. Other pieces please by their quaintness, such as Harrison's account of England in 1586 (No.

44), and John Josselyn's malicious account of New England (No. 145). Others of these selections are milestones in the growth of a national literature — all the way from Bradford's beautiful account of the Puritan exiles from England (No. 149) through the *Bay Psalm Book's* rugged measures (No. 138) to Cotton Mather's sounding brass and tinkling cymbal (No. 148). As an account of bold spirits engaged in desperate adventures, of the planting of a civilization in the wilderness, of the growth of free government, the sources of American history are a contribution to the world's literature.

3. Classification of Sources on Colonization

ASSUMING that the use of sources needs no further argument, the next important question is, What sort of material is available on the period covered by this volume?

Among the "monuments" are the Pueblos of the southwest, and the mounds of the Mississippi Valley. But the most important unwritten records stand along the seacoast. These consist of old forts, such as that at St. Augustine, Florida, of public buildings, of which very few date from the seventeenth century, of churches, as the little Roger Williams building (1634) in Salem, Massachusetts, and St. Luke's in Smithfield, Virginia (1632), and of dwelling houses, of which the Fairbanks House in Dedham, Massachusetts, and the Whitefields' in Guilford, Connecticut, are good examples. Such remains can be used by visiting them, or by showing photographs of them. In several parts of the country, as the National Museum at Washington, the Field Museum in Chicago, and the Peabody Museum in Cambridge, there are collections of the implements and arts of the aborigines of North and South America.

Manuscript records ordinarily appeal only to the investigator, for whose benefit are the suggestions in Winsor's *Narrative and Critical History*, VIII, 413 *et seq.*; and in Channing and Hart, *Guide to American History*, § 35. Two classes of written records may, however, sometimes be used by beginners — family papers and local records. From the unpublished town records of Brookline, Massachusetts, pupils in the high schools have drawn some interesting material. It is worth while to make pupils acquainted with the handwriting of the sixteenth and seven-

teenth centuries, and many facsimiles are to be found in Winsor's *Narrative and Critical History* and in many other places.

Official public records have been little used in this volume, because they seldom give a résumé of the previous history, examples have, however, been introduced of governors' reports (Nos. 70, 116, 156), of minutes of a colonial council (No. 74), and of colonial legislatures (Nos. 65, 104, 121, 131, 160), of colonial statutes (Nos. 84, 144), of a colonial constitution (No. 120), of colonizing corporations' proceedings (Nos. 50, 128), of royal proclamations (Nos. 53, 83); of a charter (No. 158), and instructions (No. 54), of the proceedings of a colonial federation (Nos. 129, 170), of an Indian deed (No. 123), and an Indian treaty (No. 92), of a colonial court (No. 141), and a county court (No. 143); and of a papal bull (No. 18).

Such records have been printed in elaborate collections for nearly all the twelve colonies formed before 1700. Sets of the charters are printed in Ben Perley Poore, *Federal and State Constitutions*, in H. W. Preston, *Documents relative to American History*, in many numbers of the *American History Leaflets* and *Old South Leaflets*; and in other collections. Lists of these collections, with exact titles, may be found in Channing and Hart, *Guide to American History*, § 29.

In the same place may be found a list of the printed colonial laws, of which hardly any state has made up a full set, the best collections are Hening's *Statutes* for Virginia and various editions of Massachusetts laws. Many early laws are printed as appendices to histories of the colonies (enumerated in Channing and Hart, *Guide to American History*, § 23).

The printed records of the colonial councils and assemblies are also enumerated in Channing and Hart, § 29. Part of the earliest of these records — Virginia, 1619 — is reprinted below (No. 65). The best printed records are those of New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut (and New Haven), Pennsylvania, Maryland, and North Carolina.

Narratives of the explorers and discoverers are among the most fascinating sources for American history, and they have been freely drawn upon for this volume. Among the writers thus cited are the Icelandic Sagas (No. 16), Columbus (Nos. 17, 19), Gómara (No. 21), Hernando Pizarro (No. 22), a Gentleman of Elvas (No. 23), Jarmillo (No. 24), Philips (No. 25), Hawkins (No. 29), Pretty (No. 30), Drake (No. 31), Barlowe (No. 32), Raleigh (No. 33), Verrazano (No. 34), Cartier (No. 35), Laudonnière (No. 36), Lescarbot (No. 37), Juet (No. 38), Champlain (No. 39), Jogues (No. 40), Le Clercq (No. 41), Marquette (No.

the years went by this became increasingly difficult. Ten years before, young men had been specially invited—with no results whatever—but now all the men of suitable age were married, and it was only when elderly bachelors like Canon Duffy and Mr Archibald had to be invited that the Miss Firdowns got the chance to come down at all. They had never been conversationalists, probably because they had never been offered anything to converse about.

Mrs Firdown and her daughters, of course, did good works. They made garments for orphanages, and carried baskets of nourishing food to sick farmers' wives on the estate.

On warm autumn afternoons, Eddie from his pantry window would catch a glimpse of the two young ladies, walking sedately along the garden paths, their arms round each other's waists, or sitting in a favourite arbour in the kitchen garden, one sewing, the other reading aloud to the worker. They were persons quite outside the range of his experience, and he hardly thought of them as real. He rarely caught a glimpse of either Mr or Mrs Firdown, and never came face to face with either of them. The people he liked most in his immediate circle were Thomas the footman and Ella the kitchen-maid. It was Ella's job to call him at five-thirty each morning. Eddie slept in a cubby-hole off the kitchen passage. It was more like a cupboard than a room, for it had no window, only a little ventilator at the top of the wall, and even at midday it was barely light in there. His bed was a throw-out from one of the other servants' rooms. It had only three legs and was supported by a wooden box which wasn't big enough, so that it tipped abruptly from north to south, and if Eddie wasn't careful he slid down to the bottom as soon as he went to sleep. Not that that bothered him much; he was always so tired at night that he could have slept on a plank. In places his mattress bulged with hard lumps of flock, and in other places it was practically unstuffed at all, but he learned to adapt the lumpy bits to his person. The floor of his cell was stone, but after he had been there three months he got round Annie, the housemaid, to find him a tiny square of worn carpet for the place where he put his bare feet down when he got out of bed. There was a wooden chair in his room, and two hooks on the wall for his clothes. He had just about enough clothes to hang on the two hooks.

Eddie didn't see much of his father while he was at work, for by the time he finished at night, at about half-past eight, Mr Boan had gone home. Occasionally he was in the kitchen when Mr Wheeler brought in the vegetables; but Mr Boan always took the flowers to the side entrance, where the flower room was, so that Mrs Yewdall could arrange them there in the vases.

Once a fortnight Eddie had an evening off, and once a month he had a Sunday half-day, and on these joyful occasions he rushed home. Mrs Boan always had a good meal ready for him, for he was always hungry, and he and Maggie would sit at the cottage door

gulping down chunks of their mother's good cake and exchanging news, while Eddie told his sister long and exaggerated stories of his life at the Manor.

Then Christmas came. Christmas was a great time at the Manor, and for days before the farm men were bringing in holly and mistletoe and other evergreens, while, under the direction of Mr Sheffield, Thomas and Eddie climbed steps and drove in nails and hung festoons in the hall and dining-room. Christmas Eve was the best time of all, for that was the night of the servants' Christmas tree. The tree was in the servants' hall, and nobody was allowed in there until Mrs Firdown and the young ladies had put the presents on it. Then it was lighted up with coloured candles and they all trooped in, in strict order of precedence, and stood in two rows with their hands folded in front of them.

When all was ready, Mr Sheffield himself flung open the door to admit Mrs Firdown, the Miss Firdowns, Mr Firdown, and several of their guests.

"A merry Christmas to you all!" said Mrs Firdown graciously.

"A merry Christmas, madam . . . a merry Christmas, sir . . . a merry Christmas, ladies and gentlemen!" chanted the company.

Then they were all called up, one by one, to get their presents. The gardeners were there too, and the grooms, and the outside workers, and Eddie looked across at his father and grinned.

The upper servants, like Mr Sheffield and Mrs Yewdall and the ladies' maids were rather reserved, and didn't open their parcels, but all the others were less inhibited and pulled the paper off at once. By now the serried ranks were broken and everybody mingled happily.

Eddie made for his father so that they could open their parcels together. As well as the side of bacon and the roll of cloth, which had already been delivered at the cottage, Mr Boan got a parcel off the tree containing a warm waistcoat. Eddie had a pair of thick socks. These garments had been made by the Miss Firdowns, and inside each was a little card with the message, 'Best wishes from Miss Elinor and Miss Kate.'

Then Eddie remembered his job and rushed to the pantry for the tray of glasses. In came Thomas with a huge tureen of smoking punch, and everybody had a glass of punch, a cake, a bag of sweets, and an orange.

It was a memorable occasion, and it finished with carol-singing before the ladies and gentlemen retired.

I wish it was always Christmas, thought Eddie as he crawled into bed with the strains of *God rest ye merry, gentlemen*, still ringing in his ears. He couldn't sleep for excitement, which was a pity, as he had to be up at five next morning, being Christmas Day and a large party in the house.

6

In Eddie's life the greatest personality of all was Mr Sheffield, and he was aware that Mr Sheffield didn't like him. There wasn't really any accounting for this antipathy, but it was there. Mr Sheffield couldn't find any fault with Eddie's work, though he often tried to, but Eddie knew in his heart that nothing he could do would ever really please the butler, who was by nature a man given to favourites and non-favourites. From the first Eddie was destined to be a non-favourite.

With all his heart he envied the butler, and his early ambition still burned, a secret fire, within his breast.

He had been two years at the Manor, and it was Mr Sheffield's half-day out. On Mr Sheffield's half-day it was Eddie's job to clean knives in the butler's pantry. As he laboured with cork and bath-brick he caught sight of Mr Sheffield's clothes hanging on their pegs, and The Idea came into his mind. It was quite irresistible.

Eddie was tall now, at seventeen, and the severe and dignified black clothes looked well on him, though he wasn't portly enough to fill out the cut-away coat. The white shirt-front, he decided, was quite stunning. He settled the tall collar and tied the black bow tie. Then, seizing Mr Sheffield's brush and comb, he carefully parted his hair in the middle and brushed it sleekly back. He picked up a silver salver and posed it on his finger-tips as Mr Sheffield always did. There was a long mirror on the back of the door in which Mr Sheffield inspected himself before going on duty. Eddie posed before it in a transport of delight, screwing up his nose disdainfully and pursing his lips.

"Very good, madam," he said aloud in a fruity voice, and was not quite satisfied so he tried it again, more fruitily.

"Thank you, m'lord. Very good, m'lord."

It was marvellous. He stepped back and struck an attitude, the silver tray aloft.

The door flew open, and there stood Rose, the chambermaid, with open mouth.

"Oh, my goodness!" said Rose. "I thought it was Mr Sheffield. Well, Eddie, you are a one!"

"I was only joking," said Eddie nervously, pulling at the bow tie. "Don't you tell anybody, Rose. I'm taking it off now."

"Oh, don't take it off; you look a real caution. I wish Annie and Cook could see you; they'd die laughing."

"No, no," cried Eddie. "I didn't mean anything. Promise you won't tell anybody, Rose."

"All right, but—let me have another look at you." Rose giggled and clapped her hands.

"You won't tell, will you?" Eddie pleaded. "It might cost me my place."

"Not if you don't want me to; but it seems a shame—it's such a good joke."

Rose kept the secret for three days, but it was too good and it burned her, so she whispered it to Miriam, the other upstairs maid, with strict instructions not to tell, and Miriam told Annie, and Annie told Cook, and Cook told Mr Sheffield.

Mr Sheffield said nothing, but he looked at Eddie, and Eddie knew that he knew. Mr Sheffield's look had a queer, fierce quality, and it said as plainly as words, "You wait, my lad. You'll be sorry for this. Remember what I said to you about ideas above your station?"

It was obvious now that Mr Sheffield realised that Eddie had ideas above his station. A cloud hung over Eddie. Every step he took henceforth had to be a wary one, and the strain was great. He grew thin and went off his food, not that the latter was attractive at the best of times, for he sat at the bottom of the servants' table, and when the dishes finally reached him only the smallest and worst portions were left, while if the pudding was a favourite one, it never lasted out as far as Eddie, and to complain meant cold stares and audible asides about greedy boys.

But the blow did not fall for five months, and when it did Eddie, in a way, brought it on himself.

There had been a big dinner-party at the Manor, thirty or more sat down, the last guest had left, and at midnight Thomas and Eddie were struggling to finish the washing up while Mr Sheffield counted the best plate and locked it away.

"There!" said Thomas. "That's the lot, thank the pigs. And my feet are giving me gip, I'll tell you. Look, Edward, there's a last job you can do. Just inside the dining-room door you'll find a big bundle of linen. I rolled everything up in a table-cloth. As you go, carry it all out to the wash-house and leave it ready for Mrs Voase in the morning."

"Shall I just put it on the floor?" asked Eddie.

"You'll cop it if you do. Open it out, fold the things, and put them on the wash-house table, and you'd better take the lantern and check them over. There should be three big table-cloths, two small ones off the serving tables, thirty-eight napkins, and two side-board runners."

Eddie staggered with his unwieldy bundle through the silent passages; lit the lantern, found the wash-house key on its hook. This final task was the last straw. He had been on his feet since five-thirty that morning and was aching with tiredness, and half asleep.

He put the lantern down on the wash-house table and opened out the bundle . . . counting . . . folding . . . longing for his bed.

Something glittered among the linen, caught by the lantern's pale ray. It was a diamond brooch which had hooked itself by its pin into a table napkin. Some lady has dropped that, thought Eddie, and

slipped it into the pocket of his serving-coat to give to Mr Sheffield in the morning.

He finished the job, nearly propping his eyes open, locked the wash-house door, took lantern and key back to the house. Five minutes later he was in bed and dead asleep. He never gave the brooch another thought.

Next day at noon when he served the upper servants' luncheon they were all talking about it. It belonged to old Lady Pardow, who had discovered her loss and had sent her coachman over first thing in the morning to Tystead Manor. Everybody had been searching ever since. Eddie had known nothing of this, for he had spent the morning down in the basement laying poison for the cock-roaches.

"Thomas and I have been on our knees over every inch of the dining-room and drawing-room floors," Mr Sheffield was saying. "On our knees!"

"And I've had my hand down the back of every chair," said Mrs Yewdall, "to say nothing of the girls poking into the corners like ferrets. It's my belief the old woman lost it in her own carriage."

"Madam is very upset," said Miss Hewitt, Mrs Firdown's maid. "I believe the brooch is extremely valuable and an heirloom. It's a nasty thing for a hostess to have it happen in her house."

Brooch! Recollection came to Eddie with a start. He went crimson, and his hand flew to the pocket of his serving-jacket.

Mrs Yewdall had noticed.

"What's the matter with you, Edward?"

The horror of all the trouble that his forgetfulness had caused flooded Eddie's mind. The whole house upset, and everybody searching, and Madam too—all because he had never given that brooch a single thought since he slipped it into his pocket last night in the wash-house

For a moment he felt paralysed.

"Nothing," he stammered.

"What's the matter?" said Mr Sheffield. "What have you got in your pocket?"

He was struggling to think of an explanation.

"It's—I mean—I didn't——"

Mr Sheffield got up.

"Edward, bring out whatever you've got in your pocket and put it here on the table in front of me."

Eddie brought out the brooch, and mutely, miserably, laid it down. Mrs Yewdall screamed, the others gave gasps and sighs

"Well!" said Mr Sheffield. "Here's a fine thing. A fine thing to happen in this house. To have a thief among us! If it hadn't been for your guilty conscience giving you away you'd have got off with your spoils, wouldn't you? And nobody suspecting."

Fire rushed to Eddie's face. "It isn't true. How could you, Mr

Sheffield! I was only trying to explain, only I was so upset about forgetting to give you the brooch this morning."

"Forgetting!" exclaimed Mrs Yewdall. "What sort of story is that?"

"I did forget, honestly I did. And I never heard of any searching this morning because I was down in the basement with the cockroach powder."

"That's true," said Mrs Yewdall. "But where did you get that brooch?"

"I found it in the linen when I was sorting it in the wash-house last night. I put it in my pocket, and I meant to give it to you first thing this morning, Mr Sheffield—only I forgot." His voice faltered, it all sounded so unlikely.

"You forgot?" said Mr Sheffield sharply. "You forgot a diamond brooch worth hundreds of pounds that was in your pocket? Why didn't you bring it to me last night?"

"I was so tired, sir. I only thought of getting to bed."

"That's a fine story. Do you expect me to believe that?"

"No," said Eddie. "But it's true."

"I don't believe you. It's the most barefaced piece of trickery I ever saw. You can take a week's notice, and be thankful I don't turn you over to the police. I would, except for the scandal that Madam wouldn't wish for."

"No!" said Eddie. "It isn't fair. I didn't steal it, I tell you, I didn't. I'm telling the truth."

He spoke so passionately that Miss Hewitt, who was soft-hearted, said, "He does sound as if he was telling the truth, Mr Sheffield."

"Kindly keep out of this, Miss Hewitt," said the butler. "I've always had my doubts about this boy, and now they're confirmed. He leaves."

"But you can't do that to me, sir—you can't. It's wicked to accuse me, I tell you——"

"Be silent," said Mr Sheffield. "Leave the room at once."

"Mrs Yewdall, ma'am——"

"I'm sorry, Edward," said Mrs Yewdall, "but you heard what Mr Sheffield said. I must say I can't swallow your explanation. I know I couldn't have a diamond brooch in my pocket and not know about it. It isn't human nature."

"But it's true. I never gave it another thought. I——"

"Out!" said Mr Sheffield. "You young blackguard."

The story went round the house like wildfire, and opinion was sharply divided. There was a war on in the servants' quarters at Tystead Manor. Mrs Firdown was so glad to get her guest's brooch back that she considered the matter closed and left the details to her butler. Mrs Yewdall, not entirely happy in her mind, nevertheless stood by her colleague; the rest of the staff took sides and argued excitedly over Eddie's guilt or innocence. Thomas, of course, was

staunchly on Eddie's side; so, surprisingly, was Cook. Some of the maids whose own honesty had been in question as they searched till the skin came off their hands turned against him fiercely.

In the afternoon Mr Boan came to the side door with some flowers and was met by one of the housemaids who told him the story.

Eddie's father was aghast. "It can't be right," he said. "Not our Eddie. He's as honest as the day—all mine are. I can't believe it; this is shocking news. But I'll stand by our Eddie through thick and thin. It's just a bad dream."

"Well, it's happened," said the maid.

"But our Eddie's innocent. I'll see Mr Sheffield."

"You'll catch it, if you do," said the maid. "You know what Mr Sheffield is. And between you and me and the gatepost, he's always had his knife into Eddie. We've noticed that."

"Then I'll see Mrs Firdown!" said Mr Boan.

Mrs Firdown at that moment, he knew, was examining the early strawberries in the lower greenhouse. Mr Boan went in to her and stood, twisting his sacking apron between his hard calloused fingers.

"Well, Boan, what is it?"

"Mrs Firdown, madam, it's about my boy Eddie. The pantry boy."

"Oh? Is the pantry boy your son? I didn't realise that."

"Yes, he's my son, madam, and a better boy never stepped. And now they're saying he stole a brooch, and it's a wicked lie."

"Oh, that brooch business. I thought that was all settled. I remember there was some boy involved, but I really can't be expected to take any interest in what goes on below stairs. That I leave entirely to Sheffield and Mrs Yewdall."

"But, madam, it's rank injustice—if you'll pardon me saying so. They're sending my boy away for something he didn't do. Think of that, madam, branding my boy a thief, and he's only seventeen. And he didn't do it! He's as honest as the light. It'll break his mother's heart and ruin us all. You've known me, madam, for twenty-eight years; I think I've got a right to speak."

Mrs Firdown paused. "Certainly I have a respect for you, Boan. You say the boy is innocent?"

"He is, madam."

"My maid told me the story, and she seemed to be of your opinion. Probably there is no truth in the story at all. But you say your son is under notice to leave?"

"Yes, madam. It's cruel and wrong."

"Very well, Boan. Much as I dislike interfering in such matters—in fact what are my butler and housekeeper for but to spare me these annoyances?—in consideration of your long service I will stretch a point. I will inform Sheffield that the boy is to stay. Please let me hear no more about it. There are enough strawberries ripe to fill a dish. Have them sent up to the house."

"Oh, thank you, madam," said Mr Boan, his whole being flooded with joyful relief

When he had a few minutes to spare he rushed round to the back door and asked to see Eddie.

"Just for a minute," he explained to the kitchen-maid.

"I'll go and find him," she said, not very agreeably.

Eddie came. He looked white and despondent.

"Well, father? So you've heard, I suppose "

Mr Boan's face lighted up in a great smile. "Yes, I've heard, Eddie, and I know it's all a mistake. So cheer up, lad. It's all over now. What do you think? I've seen Madam herself, and it's all right. She's going to tell Mr Sheffield, and you won't have to go."

For a moment Eddie couldn't take it in. "Go, father?"

"You won't have to leave. They're withdrawing your notice."

Then he understood. "I wouldn't stay here after this," said Eddie, "not if it was for a hundred pounds "

"Eddie!"

"I mean it. Mr Sheffield has a spite against me. He's always had his knife into me, and I don't know why. I've always done my best. But this decides me. I'm leaving "

"A place like this? You're mad, boy."

"Mad or not," said Eddie, "I'm leaving."

Mr Boan went off shaking his head. Eddie returned silently to his work. Not knowing that Eddie had already been informed of Mrs Firdown's intervention on his behalf, Mr Sheffield kept him on the rack for three days. Then he said abruptly one morning when Eddie was scrubbing the pantry floor, "Well, I've changed my mind. You can stay. But mind you work as you've never worked before. I shall have my eye on you, so don't get up to any more tricks."

Eddie stood up. "You haven't changed your mind, sir. Mrs Firdown has changed it for you. But you needn't worry; I'm not staying. I'm leaving on Saturday "

Mr Sheffield's face went streaky purple. "Oh, you're leaving, are you? Just like that! You think you're independent, you young scoundrel. I knew I was right the minute I first set eyes on you. Ideas above your station, that's what you've always had. But you'll come to the gutter; they always do, boys like you. Trying on my clothes! The next clothes you try on 'll have broad arrows on them, I'll be bound. Leaving! Walking out! Well, I'll tell you something. You'll walk out without a character, and you'll never get another situation; and then see what happens to you. It's me that gives the characters in this house, and *you're* not getting one."

A little bag of ice in Eddie's stomach suddenly burst and the splinters flew all over him.

"You can't do that, sir. It's unjust. You know very well I'm not guilty of anything. I've a right to a character when I leave."

"Get out!" said Mr Sheffield. "Get out, d'y' hear me? Another word from you, and you'll pack your bag and be gone tonight!"

Eddie went back to the kitchen. He had not been sleeping, and now his heavy eyes were wet with stinging tears.

"What's up?" said Cook.

"I'm leaving——"

"Nothing of the kind. It's all blown over and nobody believes you stole the ruddy brooch. Why don't you put your pride in your pocket and stay, Edward? Don't be a fool and spoil your own chances."

"There's no chances for me in this house," said Eddie. "I'm leaving, and Mr Sheffield won't give me a character."

"Won't——" Cook laid down her ladle and stared at him. "Well, of all the dirty tricks! But I wouldn't put it past him; I know what he is when he's spiteful. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," said Eddie. "But I'm not giving in. I'm not staying."

"Hey, Annie," said Cook to the maid who had just come in. "Listen to this. Old So-and-so isn't going to give Edward a character."

"Well! The mucky old trout!" said Annie.

The news went round, and soon reached Mr Boan as he worked on the border. He dropped his spade and his face twisted in dismay. It was the worst thing that could happen to his boy. Nobody would employ him without a character. What was going to happen to Eddie, to them all?

Suddenly he caught sight of Mrs Firdown, coming along the garden path in her grey silk dress with a light grey shawl round her shoulders and a grey velvet bonnet on her head, a basket over her arm and a pair of scissors in her hand. Every now and then she would stop and snip off a blossom to lay in her basket.

"Good afternoon, Boan," she said graciously. "It's such a fine day that you see I'm cutting the flowers myself. What a pity there are not more blue ones."

"There's blue delphiniums in the south border, madam," he said mechanically. "And I can find you some anchusa and larkspur——" His voice trailed away.

"Really, Boan, you could sound more cheerful on this bright afternoon. Get me the flowers."

"Yes, madam."

"Well? What is it now?"

"It's my Eddie, madam. He's set on leaving. He's had his feelings too badly hurt to stay."

"Feelings! Ridiculous. Persons in his position have no right to have feelings."

"But it's worse than that, madam. Mr Sheffield won't give him a character. You know what that means to anybody looking for another situation."

"I'm sorry, Boan, but I can't do anything about it. I'm sure that Sheffield has his reasons."

"That he has not, madam! He just wants to destroy Eddie."

"Nonsense. And I will not be dragged into kitchen squabbles."

"Madam, please, I implore you. Will you give Eddie a character? Just a few lines on paper. It'd save us all from being ruined."

Mrs Firdown shrugged her shoulders. "Now don't be hysterical, Boan. I tell you, I will not interfere. I should never have another minute's peace if I allowed myself to be attacked right and left by matters that are not my concern. I will have no more of it. I wanted to see you about the flowers for my birthday that you promised me. Have you got them? Take me to see them."

"Yes, madam. They're in the top greenhouse, madam, if you'll come this way."

Shaken and sorrowful, Mr Boan led the way to the greenhouse and opening the door stood aside for Mrs Firdown to go in.

An exclamation of delight which she could not repress broke from her lips. Carnations!—large, exquisite, flooding the place with their fragrance. And her favourite colours—palest pink, rose, dark red, and pure white.

"Really, Boan, I must say you have excelled yourself."

"Thank you, madam. I'm glad you're pleased."

"Yes, I am pleased. Very pleased indeed. *Very* pleased. You have done well. When these are arranged in the drawing-room tomorrow they will be a sight worth seeing. I am having friends to tea. I shall tell them my own gardener grew the flowers. I thank you, Boan."

"I don't want any thanks, madam. I took a lot of pains with the flowers because I love flowers and because I wanted to please you. But I don't care for them any more. I wouldn't care if they was all to wilt and turn black before my eyes, not when my boy's leaving Saturday without a character."

"Oh, are you on at that *again*?" Mrs Firdown hesitated, pursing her lips. "Very well, I suppose I must humour you, since you have done so well. By a character I suppose you mean a reference. I will give you one for your son, but never let such a thing occur again."

"Oh, madam, I will never ask another favour as long as I live. Thank you, thank you, Mrs Firdown."

"I shall go back to the house. My maid will bring you the letter in half an hour. But I really cannot think what I shall say."

"If I might suggest, madam——" Mr Boan told her what he wanted her to say.

About forty minutes later, too overcome to speak, with tears running down his cheeks, Mr Boan was at the back door pressing the letter into Eddie's hand.

Eddie packed his small bundle of clothes and spent his last night on the lumpy bed in his cubby-hole, wondering if he had been too independent. He felt rather apprehensive about what was going to

happen to him next. After Tystead Manor—what? The world was so large and unexplored, and his place in it had always been narrow and small. He was leaving the kindly Thomas behind, and other friends he had made in the house, and starting out again among strangers. But at least there would not be Mr Sheffield! Definitely he could not go on living under the same roof as Mr Sheffield.

He sighed, and lay sleepless and hungry in the dawn.

Chapter 2

I

EDDIE came home that Saturday night with his things in a bundle on his shoulder. When Mrs Boan saw him enter the cottage she burst into tears.

"Now, Mother," said Eddie. "That's enough of that."

"It's been a dreadful time. What I've lived through this week!"

"It's all over, Mother, and now I'm going to better myself."

"That's what you say. But you never know. It all seems that easy when you're young, but often it's out of the frying-pan into the fire. Good places aren't easy come by."

"There are always good places, Mother."

Mrs Boan gave a heavy sniff, and began to fill a plate for Eddie from the pot of bacon stew that bubbled on the fire.

"I know life," she said. "For poor folks it's trouble, trouble, trouble. Trouble and woe. When you're young you're full of hope, and it gets knocked out of you."

"Why, Mother, it's not like you to talk like this. What's come over you? I'll get a new place, don't worry."

"It isn't only that, Eddie love. But I've got more than I can bear just now, that's a fact. There's Florrie. That husband of hers does nothing but tupples. Every Saturday night he's in the Wheatsheaf drinking away his wages. By Tuesday there's not a penny, and our Florrie 'ud clem but for her neighbour giving her a piece of bread or two to see her through the week. Taking charity, that's what she's doing. And to think she left her nice place at the vicarage for that! I just daren't meet Mrs Darling, that I daren't."

"Well, Mother," said Eddie, who knew all about it, "that's Florrie's own fault, and you know it. I don't see you've cause to let it eat you. Both Alfie and Bertie warned her against that chap, that he was a bad one, but she was so damn-faggotly set on him she wouldn't listen to anybody. She married him with her eyes open, and she'll have to take what she's got."

"It's easy to talk," said Mrs Boan. "I'm her mother. She's my child, same as you are and all the others. If you've got ten children or twenty children you feel as much for every one of them as if they was only ones."

"Oh, Florrie'll muddle through," said Eddie. "How's Maggie getting on at Pryce Hall? My, I'd give a lot to see Maggie. I haven't seen her for weeks."

"More's the pity. You and Maggie was always as loving as two twins. She's very well and happy there, thank goodness. But it's more than I can say of Minnie. That's the worst yet. Minnie's in trouble." Mrs Boan put her apron to her eyes and tears flowed freely over her work-worn hands.

Eddie knew very well what that meant. There was only one way of being in trouble for a girl in the country.

"More fool Minnie," he said. "What's she been up to?"

"You know what a madcap she is, Eddie? She's had five places already. Can't stay nowhere, and that's a bad thing in a girl. When I was young you got into good service and you stayed there till you got married, or if you didn't get married, as long as you could go on working. I don't know what the world's coming to. Well, there was Minnie, always rushing off into the fields and woods. We think it was some gipsy lad. She won't say. The only bright spot is that Mrs Phillips, that she's with, says she'll have her back when it's over, if she can find somewhere for the baby to go. P'raps some Home 'ud take it—or p'raps I'd even take it myself, but I don't want no babies at my time of life. I'm worried to death."

Eddie left his supper and got up to put his arm kindly round his mother. "It's all right, Mother. Now smile a bit—that's right. Think what you've got to be thankful for."

Mrs Boan wiped her eyes. "You're a good boy, Eddie, one of the best. You deserve to get on. And of course I've got a lot to be thankful for. Why, you talk as good as the vicar, and on the whole you lift me up more."

"That's right," said Eddie. "And I'm going to get on, Mother, don't you ever doubt it. I'm going to be a butler some day, then you'll see! I couldn't get any higher up than that, could I?"

Mr Boan came into the kitchen.

"Everybody happy? I see you've had a good supper, Eddie. Are you going to look for a place, on Monday?"

"Yes, I am, Father."

"Where would you be thinking of looking?"

"I'm going to Shrewsbury to the Registry," said Eddie.

"Registry! Nay. Nobody in my family's ever had to go to the Registry yet. There were always plenty of the gentry coming round after them. That's a come-down, Eddie."

"Well, I'm going. Thomas says everybody goes to the Registry now. Times have changed, you know, Father."

"I'm afraid they have," said Mr Boan sadly. "And always for the worse."

Eddie set off Monday morning for Shrewsbury on foot, but soon he got a lift on a wagon full of cabbages which took him within a mile

of town. He felt excited, but nervous too, and his spirits were not very high. He was setting out on the first lone enterprise of his young life.

He thought of his family, and decided that of all his brothers and sisters Maggie was the only one for whom he really cared, and he cared for Maggie very deeply. He loved Maggie and missed her terribly, now that she was no longer at home and he rarely saw her, for their evenings out never seemed to coincide. As for the others, he thought little of them. Nellie was an old maid of thirty now, bossy and sour-tongued. Florrie was a weeping drudge with a drunken husband. Minnie was a trollop, and Dolly's vacant manner annoyed him, though Dolly hadn't done too badly for herself, in spite of her lack of brains, and was now nursemaid to two children, and gave herself airs. Alfie and Bertie were dour farm-workers without an idea beyond the muck-heap and the pub. Willie was rough in his ways and a bit of a bully; and Charlie was the village buck and boasted about the girls he'd had in the hay. A poor lot of brothers, Eddie thought.

"I'm getting past all of them," thought Eddie, as he stood on the step of a house and looked at a brass plate which said MRS BAXBY REGISTRY.

"I'll do it!" he said to himself. "I'll ask for a place as second footman. That's what I've been really, though they didn't call it that."

He went upstairs.

Mrs Baxby was a pleasant-faced but very business-like woman as she sat at her desk and faced him.

"Name, please," said Mrs Baxby.

"Edward Boan."

"Age?"

"Nineteen," said Eddie without a blush. Thomas had told him that it wasn't wrong to lie about your age when you were looking for a situation.

"Home address?"

"West Cottage, Tourlock."

"You've not been here before?" said Mrs Baxby.

"No, madam. I found my last place privately."

"I see. Where was that?"

"At Squire Firdown's, Tystead Manor."

"How long were you there?"

"Two and a half years."

"Reason for leaving?"

"I left of my own accord, ma'am."

"Have you a reference?"

"Yes, ma'am." Eddie handed over Mrs Firdown's letter.

Mrs Baxby read aloud: "Edward Boan has been in my employment for two and a half years. He is honest, sober, respectful, will-

ing, and industrious, and I recommend him for a similar situation. Signed, Elizabeth Firdown."

"Good," said Mrs Baxby. "Now what kind of situation are you looking for?"

"Second footman," said Eddie.

Mrs Baxby turned over the pages of a book. "Second footman. . . I'm afraid I haven't much in that line. I suppose you wouldn't consider single footman?"

"No, I don't think so," said Eddie, who didn't seem to have all that confidence now it came to the point.

"Second footman. . . Let me see . . . there's a second footman wanted at Lady Meade's at Innsbury Royal; that might suit you."

"Thank you, ma'am. Where is that?"

"Well, it's quite a long way from where you live. Does that matter?"

"I don't mind that."

"It's a big place. I can tell you how to get there if you think you'll apply for the situation."

"Yes, I'll try, ma'am."

"Then I'll write you a note to the butler there Will you go today?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You can get a carrier's cart from outside the Raven this afternoon to within a mile or so of the house. Take this."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"That will be one shilling. And another five shillings if you accept the situation."

At six o'clock that evening Eddie stood outside the huge gates of Innsbury Royal, staring at the quarter-mile of straight gravelled driveway that led directly to the main entrance of the biggest house he had ever seen. He was amazed that such a place could exist. Why, you could put Tystead Manor into one wing of it and never notice it was there. There it stood, as big as a town, its great pile topped with all kinds of little towers and pinnacles, and what seemed to be hundreds of windows looking back at you like so many eyes. There must be *hundreds* of windows, thought Eddie; and he wasn't far wrong, for there were a hundred rooms at Innsbury Royal.

A man came out of the lodge. "What do you want?"

"I'm the new footman," said Eddie.

"I'll open the small gate for you. Go straight up to the house, turn to your left where you see two white stones, and go round to the side door and ask for Mrs Naples."

Eddie trudged up the broad, straight avenue feeling like a small solitary fly on an enormous ceiling. On either side the flat parkland stretched, dotted with trees whose branches held golden light from the westering sun. The grass gleamed as though gold dust had been sprinkled over it.

It was not until he got right up to the house that he finally convinced himself it was real. House? You couldn't call it a house, when it was six times as big as the biggest building in Shrewsbury. The windows, an army of them, shone down on him solemnly, he so small and shrinking, they so immaculately bright. And yet so empty! There was a sense of emptiness about the whole place; you could feel it.

He found his way round to the side door and tapped on the glass. The door was opened by a pretty maid without her cap on.

"Hullo?" she said, surprised at the sight of a stranger. "Who might you be?"

"I've come after the place as footman."

"Oh. Come in." She closed the door behind him and said, "What's your name?"

"Edward. Is the situation still vacant?"

"It's vacant all right. This place isn't everybody's cup of tea, not if you're wanting a bit of life, it isn't. I suppose you want a bit of life? You're something to look at, I must say." She giggled. "Perhaps you and I'll console each other."

"I don't like girls," said Eddie.

"Tell that to the Marines. Come on, and I'll take you to Mrs Naples."

"It's the butler I'm supposed to see."

"It's Mr Sharples' day out. Mrs Naples'll see you."

She led the way down a long passage, up a short flight of stairs, and tapping at a door opened it.

"It's a young man about the place, ma'am."

"Well!" said Mrs Naples. "Come right in."

The room was extremely cosy. Although the evening was far from cold there was a big fire blazing in the grate and a sofa pulled up in front of it, and on the sofa lay Mrs Naples, sipping something out of a glass.

"Sit down," said Mrs Naples. "Get yourself warm. What's your name?"

"Edward, ma'am."

"Mr Sharples is out, so it's my job to look you over. That's right, make yourself comfortable. What I say is, if a person can't make himself comfortable in this world, where is he going to make himself comfortable?"

Mrs Naples certainly looked comfortable. She was very stout, and her three chins smiled as well as her mouth.

"Have a drop of port wine; it'll do you good. Elsie!"

The maid, who must have been just outside the door, came in hastily. "Get a glass off the sideboard for Edward; that's a good girl."

Confused by his reception, Eddie was not so bewildered as to refuse the port wine, the gentry's drink which had never previously come his way. He sat sipping it, on the edge of a basket chair, the glowing caress of the fire warm upon his legs.

"I suppose the Registry gave you a letter?"

He handed it over, with the one from Mrs Firdown. Mrs Naples read both carefully, folded them, and said, "Well, that seems all right. You're engaged. Wage is five shillings a week to start, paid on Saturdays, with board, lodging, washing, and livery. Mr Sharples will be glad I've got somebody, so will Alfred."

She rang the bell, and when the maid came again said, "Find Alfred, and tell him to come here; we've got a new footman."

The maid grinned and cast a wink at Edward, which he received with a scowl.

When she had gone Mrs Sharples said, "We're an easy-going household here, but I'll make it plain at once that there's one thing I won't have, and that's Goings-On between the men and the girls. Alfred has got a young lady of his own, so we don't have any trouble from him. Have you got a young lady?"

"No," said Eddie. "I don't like girls."

"You surprise me."

"It's true, ma'am. I don't care for girls at all, except my sister Maggie. I think girls are nasty, deceptive, giggly things. I never give them a look; I've seen too much of them."

Mrs Naples sighed and said, "Tck! tck! tck! Well, you're young. What sort of a place was it where you were before?"

"Not bad."

"Not as big as this house, I'll be bound."

"Oh no, ma'am. You could put away the whole of Tystead Manor in a corner of this and not see it, and yet I thought that was a big house."

"One lives and one learns," said Mrs Naples.

The door opened to a slight tap, and the footman Alfred appeared. Eddie stared at him in surprise and admiration. He wore a livery of maroon coat faced with blue, maroon breeches, white cotton stockings, and buckled shoes. Would Eddie himself be dressed like this? It was unbelievable. These Meades must be almost like royalty.

"Alfred," said Mrs Naples. "This is Edward."

"Pleased to meet you," said Alfred loftily.

"Thank you," said Eddie. "The same to you."

"Well, take him away and show him round."

"Come on," said Alfred. "Let's get it over." Once they were outside the housekeeper's room he said, "I'd better take you up to our room and you can get into your livery."

"Do I wear it too?" asked Eddie.

"You bet. Everything has to be like it was a hundred years ago in this place."

The room they were to share was right at the top of the vast house, a small apartment under the tiles, containing an enormous, worm-eaten four-poster bed that practically filled it, a broken looking-glass on a shabby chest of drawers, a few pegs, and nothing else.

"There it hangs," said Alfred. "Get it on."

"You'll have to help me," said Eddie. "I—I haven't worn these things before."

"Where were you? In the slums?" Alfred winked.

Eddie accepted this meekly, and when he was dressed and stood before the looking-glass he looked so fine that he didn't recognise himself.

"You've got to keep it clean," said Alfred. "Get a spot on it and there's hell to pay."

"Who from?" said Eddie. "*She* seems easy going. What's the butler like?"

"Mr Sharples? Oh, he's a decent old cove. Give him his bottle and he's as contented as a baby."

"His *bottle*—oh, I see."

"And if you've got any ideas about this being an easy place, then you ought to try a chain-gang. Work? Slavery, I call it. There's three great drawing-rooms, each as big as a church, and full of what they call Bibblyots—you know, bits of ivory and glass and silver and enamel, from China, India, Timbuctoo—and a ballroom that hasn't been used in a hundred years, but they all have parquet floors, and polish! Have to be kept so you can see your face in them. Wait till *your* knees are down to the bone! And the chandeliers! Millions of crystal dangles, all to be taken down once a fortnight and washed and polished. One speck of dust on those, and you'll bleed to death. I'm warning you."

"But who——"

"Her ladyship, of course. My, my, my!"

"Oh," said Eddie doubtfully. "Is there a large family?"

"Large? What are you talking about? There's only the old lady."

"Only the old lady? One old lady!"

"Well, she's equal to about six, even if she is eighty. She has what they call all her facilities."

"One old lady, for all this? How many servants?"

"Nineteen," said Alfred. "Not counting Miss Bliss. She's her ladyship's companion. She's about ninety, and hasn't any facilities at all. A poor relation, I think."

"Nineteen servants, to wait on one old lady!"

"Ah, but, you see, it's like this. Her ladyship inherited this place from her grandfather, and he was born in 1760. She was brought up here. Then she married and went out to India, but her husband died and she hadn't any children. Her grandfather left her this place because there wasn't any heir. So she came back; and everything has always got to be like it was in 1760, if you get my meaning. Nobody ever uses the rooms; they're more like museums than rooms, but she'll have them kept as if the Queen herself was coming to stay, and no nonsense about that."

"She doesn't stop in bed, then?" said Eddie. "I thought people who were eighty stopped in bed."

"She stops in her rooms when she's got a cold. She's got one now. Her rooms are at the first-floor front, and I carry her meals up. It's really the second footman's job—that's you. And I warn you. You carry up her luncheon, and you've barely got down again when clang-clang-clang goes her bell. Up you go. One of the spoons has got a speck on it. You can't see the speck. Nobody could, because it isn't there. But you say, 'I'm sorry, m'lady', and bring it down and polish it on the back of your breeches and take it up again, and she says, 'That's better.' Then down you come again, and the bell rings again, and up you go. This time the salt isn't white enough, or the sugar doesn't come through the sifter fast enough, or she doesn't like that tray-cloth, or she thinks she'll change her mind about the wine. Whatever it is, she has you up and down nine or ten times before she's satisfied. You'll see!"

"Oh," said Eddie.

"How old are you?"

"Nineteen."

"Got a girl?"

"No."

"You're lucky. Come on; time for our supper. Servants' hall. We all eat together here. Then you can take her ladyship's up, and God help you."

Eddie had the best meal he had ever had in his life. He wondered if all the meals at Innsbury Royal were going to be like this one, and time proved that they were. Three great joints of meat, bread galore, mounds of butter, pies, cakes, cheese, ale and porter to drink, wine for Mrs Naples.

"Now for it," said Alfred

The great silver tray was prepared, and following Alfred up the front staircase—up which you could have driven a carriage and pair—Eddie staggered under the weight of the tray and his apprehension.

Alfred knocked at a door, and, grinning, stepped aside.

"In you go, my boy."

Eddie went in. A vast, dim room with a window shrouded in lace. He was looking straight into the round eyes of a little old woman whose appearance might have been copied from the coloured picture of Queen Victoria which hung over the mantelpiece in his mother's kitchen. She sat in a huge carved chair, and her satin dress billowed down to the flowery carpet. She had black silk mittens on her hands and what seemed to be dozens of gold chains round her neck. The erection on her head was less a cap than a mitre.

"Who are you?" she said. "A new face. That's it, a new face."

"I'm the new footman, m'lady."

"That's no answer. I can see that for myself. What's your name? Where do you come from?"

"Edward, m'lady. From the Registry at Shrewsbury, ma'am—sir—m'ladyship."

"Oh. That's the latest! Bliss, they breed and raise them in the registry now, what do you think of that?"

The other old lady in the room was so minute and insignificant that she hardly seemed to exist at all. She might have been a cat, so little to be noticed was she.

"Put the tray down," said Lady Meade. "Come on, now; you've got a tongue. Tell me about yourself."

It was such a relief to get the monumental silver tray with its load of dishes safely placed on a small table that Eddie was in a mood to tell anybody anything.

"I come from a little village called Tourlock, m'lady," he said. "My father's a gardener, and I've got nine brothers and sisters."

"Nine brothers and sisters! Do you hear that, Bliss? Oh, what a fortunate young man you are! I never had any brothers and sisters. If I'd had just two or three I wouldn't have been a lonely old woman who has to pay people to come and talk to her. I pay you, don't I? You may think I'm a rich old woman, but really I'm a poor, poor old woman, aren't I, Bliss?"

You could tell that the little cat was giving a faint, deprecating smile.

"Edward," said Lady Meade, "when you're old you'll be richer than I. You'll have your own around you to cheer you up and make you feel that there's still something in life besides the empty world about you."

"I don't know about that, m'lady," said Eddie, who was feeling quite at ease and enjoying himself. "My brothers and sisters don't amount to much—that is, except my sister Maggie. I love Maggie, but you can have the rest."

Lady Meade gave a snort of laughter. "Tell me about Maggie. Yes, now, while I eat this mess. What is it?"

"Chicken, m'lady."

"It tastes like a bit of old rook. And this fork is filthy! Take it away and fetch me another."

"Very good, m'lady."

Down he went to the pantry and, though he could not see anything wrong with the fork, he dutifully changed it for another and returned to Lady Meade's room.

"A clean fork, m'lady."

"I should think so!" she said sharply. "And you were talking some nonsense about your brothers and sisters. I am not interested in your brothers and sisters. Bear that in mind in future."

"Very good, m'lady."

"The things I am interested in are beautiful things that have stood the test of time. Look round this room—don't goggle, just look. Did you ever see such beautiful furniture? It was made by craftsmen long before you were born, and it will be cared for and tended by hands that appreciate it long after you are dead. My house

is full of equally beautiful pieces, and it will be your privilege to tend some of them. Privilege, I say! No pushing round a chamois leather with a grumble. Consider yourself lucky that in your cheap, silly little lifetime you are permitted to handle some of the timeless treasure of the centuries. Have you got the brains to understand what I'm saying?"

"I understand you, m'lady."

"I hope you do. I must say, you look more intelligent than most of them. And I like your straight nose and the colour of your hair. I've never known a bad man with chestnut hair. Have you, Bliss?"

The poor little cat, who had dropped into a half doze, sprang up with a painful jerk, and asked if Lady Meade required anything.

"Idiot!" said Lady Meade. "I'm lecturing the new footman. I'm putting the fear of God into him. Young man, you're here to work, and work you will, or I'll know the reason why."

"I'm ready to work, m'lady."

"That's what they all say. But there's something different about you. I think you've got personality, though why in the name of all that's holy a footman should have personality is beyond me. Personality, Edwin—did you say your name was Edwin?"

"No, m'lady, Edward."

"I prefer Edwin, but if your parents were so misguided as to give you the less attractive name, I suppose we shall have to put up with it. Personality, I was saying, is a dangerous thing in an underling. Do you know what an underling is?"

"No, m'lady."

"Well, find out. You may go. And tell Mrs Naples I haven't enjoyed my meal at all, and she'll have to do better."

"Very good, m'lady."

2

During the weeks that followed Eddie found that his task was to be doing manual labour in vast apartments that were never used. The drawing-rooms were like museums, crammed with valuable furniture and works of art, from life-size statues in alabaster to tiny enamel snuff-boxes reposing in cabinets of walnut and mahogany. Hundreds of articles had to be washed and polished, and brilliant must be their state of gloss, for Lady Meade on her daily inspection knew in a moment if one of them had gone without attention. Her memory of her treasures was remarkable. On opening a cabinet, crowded as it might be with bibelots, she saw in an instant if one of them had not been replaced in its rightful position. She could also spot one cloudy lustre depending from the tremendous chandeliers, and there were eight of these, each bearing at least one hundred lustres. As well as the drawing-rooms there were the ballroom, library, and dining-room, and though the maids helped with these, Lady Meade considered the regular cleaning of a host of oil-paintings

was the footmen's work. As for the library, she had a way of picking from its place one obscure volume out of thousands, sniffing it, and opening its yellow pages; if there was the faintest musty smell her sharp eyes would find the culprit.

The palatial vacuum in which he spent the greater part of his days had a strange effect in developing Eddie's imagination. He found himself picturing the ballroom full of the whirling figures who at some time must have filled it, and when he shut his eyes he seemed to see the coloured dresses like an animated rainbow, and the flashing jewels that the ladies must have worn, and he heard sweet, old-fashioned tunes drifting down from the musicians' gallery.

"I'm going batty!" he thought, and added to himself, "My, but they must have had fine times in those days. That would be something worth seeing!"

The library, too, intrigued him. All those books and nobody to read them. All right *smelling* them! But they might have been lumps of wood for all her ladyship got out of them. If only Maggie could have seen this lot! What ecstasy for a girl like Maggie to be let loose here; she'd have been in a trance of reading for days, curled up on that great deep sofa. He must tell Maggie about this room, though he really didn't think he was capable of describing it. The thought made him pause, and his spirits sank, for it was such a long time since he had seen Maggie; and when—if ever—was he going to see her again? When he had his evenings off there was no time to go to Tourlock. On an impulse he had chosen this distant place because to do so gave him a feeling of independence, of having made a life for himself far away from his family; but perhaps he had been rash and punished himself. He had not realised that it would mean never seeing his parents and Maggie, who herself was rarely at home.

Then there was the dining-room. It was eighty feet long, and the great mahogany table accommodated sixty people. When Lady Meade was in normal health she took her luncheon and dinner there. *Alone*. Miss Bliss, the companion, always ate upstairs, that is to say when she ate at all, for it was nobody's particular business to carry up her meals, and therefore she was often forgotten, and was too meek to complain.

Lady Meade's cover was laid at the head of the fifty-foot-long table. More than that, she would not eat at an empty board, so every one of the sixty places had also to be laid, with full and imposing array of cutlery and crystal, and cleared away again when the meal was over. At each meal the three men—Mr Sharples, Alfred, and Eddie—would solemnly attend the old lady, serving her meal in dignified silence. Rarely was a word spoken, and every foot-fall was hushed on the deep carpet. Silently the silver dishes were proffered, and since there was always enough food for half a dozen and her ladyship only ate enough for a bird, the greater part of it went back to the kitchen.

Mr Sharples' job was obviously a sinecure. He looked after the wine cellar, which was stocked as though to last a lifetime, and carried upstairs the one bottle of white wine and the single glass of sherry wine which Lady Meade took every day. The rest of the day, having set everybody else to his or her appointed task, he spent peacefully in front of the fire in his room, in his shirt sleeves, with a 'bottle', three newspapers, four pipes, and a pack of cards.

"He doesn't know he's alive," thought Eddie. "That's the sort of job I want, like Mr Sharples." And then he would think, No, that wouldn't suit me at all. When I'm a butler I'm going to be a proper butler.

When he had been at Innsbury Royal about six months Lady Meade caught another cold, and was confined to her rooms upstairs.

Again Edward carried up her luncheon, and almost as soon as he entered the room she said, "Oh, you're here again!" as though she had not set eyes on him all those months.

"Yes, m'lady," said Eddie, setting down the tray and waiting for adverse comments.

"You were going to tell me about your sister."

"Y—yes, m'lady," said Eddie, taken by surprise at the uncanny way her memory worked.

"Well? Go on, tell me. This fish looks barely eatable, so I shall not take long over it."

"Well, m'lady, there isn't much to tell. She's in service at Pryce Hall, near my home, but I never see her now."

"Why not?"

"It's a long way away—where I live—and there's never time for me to go. I mean, there's only my evening off——"

"So you want to see your sister?"

"Oh yes, m'lady."

"Then why don't you? You may have the day off on Friday."

"Friday! A—a whole day!"

"That's what I said. You look more confused than pleased. Tell Sharples that it is my order that you have the day off on Friday, and I wish to hear no more about it. Take this luncheon away and bring me a better one."

"Oh, *thank* you, m'lady!" gasped Eddie, seizing the tray and fairly galloping downstairs to the pantry, where he gasped to Alfred, "She doesn't like her luncheon, she wants a different one, and she says I'm to have a whole day off on Friday to go home!"

"Cook *will* be pleased!" said Alfred dryly, and added, "I don't mean about the day off. I shouldn't count on that too much, if I were you. I know her!"

But Eddie wrote a postcard to Maggie imploring her to try and get some time off on Friday, and for the rest of the week he went about his work in a daze of excitement, poised between hope and despondency. But Friday came and nothing had been said about his

not going, so he got up at five, and putting some bread and cheese in his pocket, set off in winter darkness.

He walked for three miles, and then was overtaken by a farm cart which, though slow, went rather more quickly than he could have walked, and took him nearly to Shrewsbury.

His mind was assailed with doubts. He would have to leave home again no later than four. Supposing Maggie could not get off until evening? He must face the fact that after all this he might not see her at all. Never mind, it would be nice to see his mother and sit at ease in the cottage. And he was lucky to have a home of his own among his own people. Alfred had no home. His mother was dead and he had lost sight of his father years ago. His young lady worked at Squire Jelph's, eight miles away; he had met her at some Easter merry-making, but now they so rarely had the chance to meet that the affair was dying through lack of nourishment.

Eddie was in Shrewsbury by 8.30, and set off walking along the homeward road; but he was lucky enough to be picked up by a friendly-disposed groom driving a fast dog-cart and taken seven miles on his way. Another lift and some more walking as the winter morning brightened, and he was home.

The cottage looked so still and peaceful. The only things that moved were the plume of pale smoke ascending from the chimney, a few starlings pecking on the square of grass before the door, and the old dog crawling forward, belly to earth and tail wagging, to meet Eddie.

Then the door was flung open and Maggie came running out. She had caught sight of him from the window before he had had a glimpse of her. Two quick strides, and brother and sister were hugging one another; Eddie pulling Maggie's dark hair with little loving jerks, and Maggie patting Eddie's cheeks.

"Oh, you're earlier than we expected!" she cried. "And aren't we lucky? I got your card, and it was the greatest good fortune. The family are away from home and we're quiet at the Hall, so Nellie said I could have the day off to come home and see you."

"Nellie? What's she to do with it?"

"Nellie's the head maid, and now Mrs Tufton isn't well Nellie gives the maids their orders. Eddie, you do look fine! You're about two inches taller. Mother, Mother," she cried as Mrs Boan appeared at the cottage door, "here's Eddie, and doesn't he look well?"

Mrs Boan ran, a little creakily, for she suffered badly from rheumatism, to clasp her son.

"Come in, lad; come away in. Oh, this is a happy day! I'll bet you're hungry. I'll have some bacon sizzling in half a tick."

"Yes, I'm hungry enough," Eddie confessed. "I could eat a house, but that's only because I set off long before breakfast and ate a bit of bread and cheese on my way. But don't you think I'm ill-fed—oh no. Look at me."

He had grown taller and broader, his thin, boyish face had filled out, and he looked like a man, with bright eyes and colour in his cheeks and a confident air about him.

He ate his breakfast, protesting that neither his mother nor Maggie would sit down and talk to him, so anxious were they to wait on him, fill his cup, replenish his plate.

"That's enough!" he cried. "I came to talk, to tell you all about Innsbury Royal. What a place! You'll never believe——"

He was launched on his tremendous story. The great house, the rooms, the treasures, the work he had to do, Mr Sharples, Alfred, and above all Lady Meade.

"Just like Queen Victoria, she is; look at that picture over the mantelpiece, Maggie, and you've got her to the life. Bar the crown, of course. And if you could see her having her dinner, with fifty-nine covers laid and never used. But does she care about that? No. One fork out of place and she'd raise the roof."

"And you say they feed you well?" asked Mrs Boan.

"Feed! There's nineteen of us in the servants' hall, to say nothing of the men outside, and enough food at every meal for about fifty. Great joints of meat—and such puddings—and cakes. It's wicked really, the waste there must be. The old lady never inquires about things like that. She's never been to her kitchens in her life. But I'm talking too much. How's my father?"

"He's not so bad," said Mrs Boan, "though he's like me: his joints get pretty stiff in the winter time. Perhaps you and Maggie will have time to slip up to the gardens and see him."

"Of course. We'll go now, shall we, Maggie? I'll have to be starting back by four; even so, I'll have most of my journey in the dark."

The sun was up, softening the November day into autumnal beauty, outlining the bare tree-trunks with gold and sparkling on the stubble. Brother and sister walked along the rutted lane between banks green with ivy, their fingers linked. A few rusty leaves still hung upon the trees, and from the hedge dangled sprays of un-ripened blackberries, red and cold, left to be the prey of winter.

"Do you remember, Eddie, what fun we used to have picking the blackberries? We were going to have a little hut out there in the fields and live together, and it was always going to be summer. Don't children have funny ideas?"

"Children!" he mocked. "What are you now, I'd like to know? You're only fifteen."

"I'm grown-up!" she said indignantly. "And I'd have you know I'm learning to sew very well, I like it, and the housekeeper is teaching me, so that perhaps I can be a sewing maid later."

"Do you ever read any books now?"

Maggie shook her head rather sadly. "I haven't got the time, or the books. But I suppose there are other things in life."

"It's funny," said Eddie. "People who want books haven't got time or books, and people who don't want books have got all the books in the world, and all the time in the world. If I could have just one wish from a fairy, Maggie, I'd wish that you could have a whole day in the library at Innsbury Royal. Just to see you! Curled up there in front of a big fire that I'd light for you, opening hundreds and hundreds of books and reading a bit here and a bit there."

"Well, *that* one won't come true."

"You never know. Anything can come true."

"I don't care so long as I know you're happy, Eddie—and you do seem to be, though I think it must be dull in that great place, with no company. It makes a lot of work, but I'd rather have the house full of people, all the same, and plenty going on. I like it at Pryce Hall when the family come back: Mr and Mrs Pryce and the young ladies and the two young gentlemen from Cambridge. It's gay, and you can hear them laughing and singing about the house; and there are such parties! When nobody's about I hide behind the banisters and look down at the ladies' dresses—pink silk, blue silk. It's like fairyland."

"One day I'll give you silk dresses," Eddie said. "I will, Maggie. That isn't a wish; it's a promise. And, Maggie, I've got such an idea!" Eddie stood still and slapped his leg. "Why shouldn't you come and get a place at Innsbury Royal? There's sure to be a place there soon, and I could speak to Mrs Naples. She's a very decent sort, and——"

Maggie's face fell. "I'm afraid it isn't any use. Nellie wouldn't let me leave the Hall."

"What's our Nellie got to do with it?"

"Nellie says that no girl has got to leave under five years, unless she's dismissed. If she does she won't get a character."

"I call that silly. I wouldn't be afraid of our Nellie."

"Oh, it's very difficult, Eddie. But I've been there two years already, and if you're still at Innsbury Royal—you never know. It would be lovely if we could be together."

"We'll be together all right someday. If not at Innsbury Royal, somewhere else. That's what we'll do, Maggie. I'll be butler and you'll be head maid or even housekeeper."

"Me housekeeper!" Maggie shook with laughter. "You have to be about forty to be housekeeper."

"Rubbish. We'll make you the youngest housekeeper in the world and me the youngest butler."

"I might get married, you never know."

"Oh, Maggie!" Eddie gave her a disgusted look. "Would you rather have some beast of a chap than be with me?"

"He needn't be a beast. I wouldn't be a fool like Florrie. I'd like to marry a nice farmer and have my own farm. That'd be something!"

"Well, you're not marrying anybody for years. I'll see to that. Anything can happen, and I've set my heart on us two being together."

"Well, don't let's argue. We're together now, and that's all that matters."

They reached the Manor gardens, and spent some time with their father there. Mr Boan was delighted with Eddie.

"You've got a good place," he said. "No doubt about that. You look grand, and there's our Maggie nearly a young woman! Rosy cheeks the colour of my azaleas. If you ask me, the two babies of the family have turned out the best."

"Babies!" Eddie and Maggie, tall, well set up, full of life and happy vitality, laughed as they set off back to the cottage.

The short day of liberty was over too soon, and Mrs Boan wept a little—from force of habit—when the time came to part, knowing that it might be months before they were together again.

"Good-bye, Mother—good-bye, Maggie," said Eddie, as they kissed, and he and his sister tussled a little, as puppies do. "If Lady Meade takes any more fancies to give me a day off—and who knows what she'll do!—I may be back sooner than we expect."

The twilight was cold and lay mauve on the fields when he set off. Bars of angry orange sunset hung low in the sky, but he was warm and happy as he strode along, looking over his shoulder for the chance vehicle that would eventually come along and pick him up.

3

Next day when he carried up Lady Meade's luncheon she said, "Where were you yesterday?"

Here it comes! thought Eddie, cold at the knees.

"You gave me the day off to go home and see my sister, m'lady."

"So I did. You saw her?"

"Oh yes, m'lady. We had a lovely day."

The prim little mouth turned up in a prim little smile. "Do you hear that, Bliss? He's young and he had a lovely day. It's a long time since I had a lovely day, and I doubt if you ever had one in your life, Bliss. Or did you?"

"Perhaps I did—when I was young," said the little squeaking voice.

"That's it. If we all had our time over again! There's one supreme gift that we'd all long for, a gift that the gods can never confer, and that's to go back to the beginning of life again, knowing what we know now. What a life that would be! Youth and power and riches and knowledge, all together. Ah, but I'm a foolish old woman. The most glorious gifts in the world, but never the four together. Do you agree, Edward?" She flashed the question at him, with a keen look.

"Well, m'lady—since you ask me, there's something else. Loving."

"Yes—that's a gift too. But one can struggle on without it. I have done without it. A great deal of what you call loving is mere sentimentality. Can you play cribbage, Edward?"

"No, m'lady."

"Have you got any brains?"

"I hope so, m'lady."

"Then directly you have cleared away my luncheon you will come up here and learn to play cribbage with me. If there's one thing I enjoy it's a keen game of cribbage, and Miss Bliss is simply incapable of giving me a fight for my money. She lets me win. You wouldn't let me win, would you, Edward?"

"If I knew how to play, m'lady, I'd try and win myself."

"The proper spirit. Why have you brought me the wrong glass?"

"The wrong glass, m'lady?"

"I detest this set of glasses. The pattern offends me. Fetch me another—any other."

"Very good, m'lady."

Edward learned to play cribbage, and proved to be remarkably good at it. His quick brain soon seized upon the finer points, the subtleties of the game. Thereafter, every afternoon when it was too cold or too wet for Lady Meade's drive, he and she would sit down at a Louis Quinze table, pegs and board arranged, cards stacked, and play absorbed for hours. Deep in the game, they played as equals, forgetting that they were mistress and servant, shouting with glee as they scored, triumphing over one another with quick, sly remarks. The old lady kept the score, and one day she said, "It's time to settle up," and opening her velvet bag handed Eddie two pounds.

"Oh no, m'lady! What's this?"

"It's your winnings. It's what I owe you."

"But that isn't fair——"

"Isn't fair! Are you insinuating that I'm cheating you, you young scoundrel?"

"I meant, it isn't fair, because if I'd lost I couldn't have paid you."

"But you haven't lost!" she cried, shaking her fist at him. "Come along—it's your deal."

"Let's make this a challenge game," he said. "If I win I get a day off."

"You young dog! Very well, I'll accept the challenge, but I call it a form of blackmail. You go out for the day, and I have a miserable time without my cribbage."

"I may not win, m'lady; and if I do, my day off may be a fine day and you can go out in the carriage."

"Cheat! Blackguard! Impostor!"

Eddie won, and spent a day at his home with his mother and

Maggie, who had been saving up her own half-days for just such an occasion as this.

"You do have the luck!" said the other footman, Alfred. "Fancy the old girl taking to you like that, and me doing all the work. But that's life, and I don't grudge you anything."

"It's very decent of you, Alfred," said Eddie. "And I'll get up earlier in the mornings and do an extra hour to save you. You know what she is. She'll suddenly get tired of her games and I'll be back on my knees with you polishing the parquet."

On the way home he had spent the whole of the two pounds in Shrewsbury on presents for his parents and Maggie. It was worth it, to see their faces. A big blue lacy shawl for his mother, a pipe and tobacco for his father, and eight yards of rose-coloured silk to make a Sunday dress for Maggie, with the ribbon to trim it.

Maggie was delirious. "I can make it up in the evenings, and the other girls will help me. But it's going to be so grand, Eddie; I don't think I'll ever dare to wear it."

"You'll wear it to church," he said. "I shan't see you in it, but I'll picture you."

Maggie clasped and kissed the shimmering folds; Mrs Boan flung the shawl round her shoulders and said she would never feel cold again; Mr Boan, who was having a half-holiday, lit his pipe and said it was the best he had ever smoked, and he felt like the Prince of Wales.

A few days later, as they sat at their game, Lady Meade said, "I shall be dead soon, shan't I, Edward?"

"Oh no, m'lady. That's not true. What makes you feel like that?"

"I just feel it. Nobody's going to care for my treasures after I'm gone, and I can't take so much as a snuffbox with me, not even the one that belonged to Louis le Roi-Soleil. It would be a great thing if I could, wouldn't it? To walk up to His Majesty in some sort of Heaven and say, 'I've brought you your snuffbox, sir!' " The plump little face broke into a delighted smile. "I've never met a king, Edward, but a king once stayed here—in my grandfather's time, before I was born. That was King George the Third. He went mad afterwards, but it wasn't brought on by staying at Innsbury Royal. I'll tell you something, Edward. I'm going to make my will and leave you some money."

"Oh, m'lady, that wouldn't do."

"Wouldn't do? What are you talking about? Don't you dare talk back to me, or I'll dismiss you without a character! I'm going to leave all the servants some money, but you mustn't tell them, or they'll get above themselves. Cook might even poison me. But I'm going to leave you the most. What will you do with it, Edward?"

"That's hard to say."

"Why is it hard to say? If you haven't got the brains to think

what you're going to do with the money, then you don't deserve the money, and I may change my mind."

"I meant, it was a nasty thing to talk about—what I'd do if you were dead, because that is what it amounts to. It sounds cruel and unfeeling."

"Never mind. I shan't be as dead as you think. I shall be looking down, chuckling at you. What will you do with the money, Edward?"

"Just talking offhand, I think I'd give my father some of it, enough so that he didn't have to work any more, especially on winter days when his rheumatism twinges. And I'd buy him a little greenhouse, because he'd never be happy without growing flowers. And I'd buy a little house for me and Maggie, and we'd let rooms to a curate or somebody like that."

"It sounds dull," said Lady Meade. "But if that's what you want, you shall have it. Now deal the cards, and if I win this game you shall pay a forfeit and Alfred shall have a whole day off, and you shall do all his work."

Edward lost the game and paid the forfeit.

Spring and summer came, and another autumn. One Sunday morning, when Lady Meade had been driven in the barouche to church, a maid came running to Eddie, who was cleaning silver in the pantry.

"There's a young man at the back door asking for you, Eddie."

"For me!"

Wondering, he went out. He recognised his brother Charlie.

"Is that you, Eddie? I've been sent to fetch you. Our Maggie's bad."

"Maggie! What's the matter?"

"She cut her hand with a knife about a week ago, and it didn't seem much then, but it went wrong and her arm turned nasty, and then it was too late. The blood-poisoning's all over her now, and she's at home, and the doctor says she won't get better. It's just a matter of hours."

"Maggie," said Eddie, stunned. "It can't be true. It can't."

"Mother sent me. Can you come back with me?"

"I'll see. Come in, Eddie."

"I set off at five o'clock. I've walked twenty miles."

Eddie flew to Mr Sharples and got permission to go. After a brief drink and a bite in the kitchen for Charlie—Eddie could not touch any food—the brothers set off. Eddie would have run, but Charlie was very tired and plodded along the road. At last they were picked up and got a lift into Shrewsbury. Then another long trudge. They didn't talk. All Charlie's usual bounce and brag had gone out of him from sheer weariness.

They reached the cottage at two o'clock. It looked as it had always looked, untouched by time, as though it had grown like a

tree out of the ancient earth. The kitchen was empty and silent except for the tick-tock of the old clock on the wall. The footsteps of the two brothers sounded loud on the scrubbed flags, and the door of the parlour opened. Nellie came into the kitchen.

"It's you, Eddie. I'm glad you've come."

"How is she?"

Nellie gulped and shook her head.

"Has she asked for me?"

"She's past asking for anything, Eddie. Shall I make you a cup of tea?"

"It'd choke me. Can I go and see her?"

"Yes. She's in there. Come with me."

Maggie was lying on a low bed in the parlour. Her face was swollen and flushed, the breath seemed to come painfully between her parted lips.

"Maggie!" said Eddie. "It's me. It's Eddie. Wake up, Maggie."

His mother was hanging over the bed, watching every movement of the girl's body.

"She doesn't know you, Eddie. She hasn't known any of us, or where she is, or anything."

"But she's got to get better!" Eddie cried, beating his clenched fist against his side. "She can't be as ill as that?"

"The doctor says its septic-something. It's gone too far. Nobody can't do anything for her."

"I won't believe it! Oh, Mother!"

"There, there, lad. I knew you'd take it bad."

Eddie leant over the bed and touched Maggie's cheek with his finger. "Maggie lass, wake up. It's Eddie here. Come on, no fooling." The pale lids seemed to flutter for a moment, then the face contorted, and the breathing seemed to grow fainter.

Eddie gave a loud sob, and said, "I'm sorry, Mother. It's hard for you too. I was forgetting. Is the doctor coming again?"

"He said he'd be here at three, and he'll stay till the end."

"The end—oh God!"

"Ssh, lad. Go in the kitchen now and let Nellie make you some tea. We'll all have a cup, because we've taken nothing since yesterday."

"When did they bring her home?"

"Yesterday. They were very kind at Pryce Hall and would have kept her there, but we wanted her home, and the doctor said it couldn't make any difference either way."

"Let me stay with her while you have some tea, Mother. I don't want anything—truly I don't."

Mrs Boan slipped away, and in ten minutes was back. Nellie stayed in the kitchen and prepared food for the men, but Mr Boan pushed his plate away. Only Charlie ate.

The doctor came, and spoke kindly to the family; but the case, he

explained, was far beyond human aid, no matter how young and strong the patient might be. Why, only last week a fine young fellow of eighteen on one of the farms had died from a poisoned finger that he'd neglected.

His kindly words fell on ears that were deaf with anxiety, yet there was no hysteria of grief. Everyone was quiet, perhaps because none of them could believe this was anything but a bad dream.

Eddie sat by Maggie's side, his hands between his knees. For hours he did not move; his eyes never left her face looking for a sudden gleam, a chance lifting of the heavy lids. Sometimes he whispered to her, and found it hard to imagine that she did not hear. Towards evening the colour suddenly left her face and her lips closed. Now her breath was so faint that one could hardly discern it.

"Is she better?" asked Eddie. His mother shook her head.

Maggie died at nine o'clock.

"Go along out, lad," said Mrs Boan. "Leave her to me and Nellie for a bit."

Eddie went into the garden. The moon was high that night, and every shrub and stone had a pale glow of its own. He had never been so conscious of the hushed and holy beauty of nature, nor of its carelessness of human sorrow. He felt so alone. So fearful, so bereft; lost and unspeakably alone.

Nellie came out at last. "I've got Father to eat some supper. You'd better have some too. Folks have got to go on living, you know."

"Supper? What are you talking about?" he said angrily.

"You're only a kid, Eddie. It doesn't do to take on. I was fond of our Maggie too."

He went into the kitchen. His father was sitting at the table looking down at a plate of food without touching it. His mother was sitting by the hearth.

"Mother," said Eddie, "did she ever wear the dress—the pink silk?"

"Yes, she did. And she looked lovely in it."

"I'd like it back."

"She's got it on now, Eddie," said Nellie.

4

Sharples drew back the high carved chair and Lady Meade rose from the table. Alfred slipped silently to open the door. Eddie stood back against the sideboard.

"Edward?"

"Yes, m'lady."

"I'm sorry you lost your sister. I have just been informed."

"Thank you, m'lady."

"You may convey my condolences to your mother."

"Thank you, m'lady."

"It comes to us all. You're only beginning. Look at me—an old woman—with all of them gone! I will excuse you from your game with me this afternoon. I shall expect you tomorrow afternoon at half-past two."

"Very good, m'lady."

The cribbage afternoons began again as though the sequence had never been broken. There they sat in the overheated, airless room, curtains shrouded against the daylight, among the hangings of velvet and lace, the crammed furnishings of mahogany and gilt and ormolu and marble; two people at a Louis Quinze table: the plump old woman padded like a puppet in her fusty black, with her little tight proud cheeks and protruding blue eyes; the broad-shouldered young man in fantastic garb of maroon and blue, his long legs restless and cramped, his youthful face drawn with strained intent.

"—and two makes thirty-one!" cried Lady Meade. "My game. You are playing like a nincompoop, and you let me win."

"I'm sorry, m'lady. I don't seem to be able to keep my mind on it."

"Pah! I suppose you are too concerned with altering your plans about what you will do with my money."

"I haven't any plans now," said Eddie. "Maggie was in all my plans."

"And how old are you? Is your life ended? Are you by any chance eighty years old? Let me tell you, my husband died when I was five-and-thirty, bitten by a snake on our own veranda in Mullampore. What did I do?—I made new plans, I went on living. I travelled the world and collected treasures for my eyes, if I couldn't have them for my heart. I suppose you envy me?"

"No, m'lady."

"Why not?" she asked in a haughty, demanding tone.

"I wouldn't like to be—old," said Eddie, nervously frank, "and I wouldn't like to have so much around me and—never use it."

"Use it? Use it? You mean, this house. Well, what do you expect me to do? Open my doors to the loud-voiced, red-faced, horse-minded, whisky-swilling, gossip-nibbling, big-toothed County, eh?"

"It would be a bit of life," said Eddie.

"I have all the life I want. Go on—I have dealt! Really, I have no patience with you."

For the next few months Eddie went about in a state of numb dissatisfaction. As a spot of black decay in the heart of a flower paralyses its vibrant growth, so was the expansion of his life checked. What life for a young man was this? Futile toil, bright days passing while he was shut away from the sunlight, a round of pointless duties performed in a place that was no better than an elaborate grave. He had no friends, no one to talk to except Alfred; nor was he popular in the household, for the upper servants thought of him as

the mistress's pet and were wary of him for that reason, while the maids disliked him because, try as they would, he gave no response to their seductive advances. He had no amorous inclinations at all, and even this depressed him and made him feel there was something wrong with him.

In the year that followed Maggie's death he only went home twice, and he did not enjoy his visits. His mother had been ill, and had emerged from her illness a little vague and childish. Some two years before, Minnie had given birth to her child of shame, a little girl, who was placed with a foster-mother. In the emptiness that followed the loss of Maggie, Mrs Boan had decided to adopt this child and had brought her home to the cottage, where she poured out upon the little thing a doting and exaggerated devotion. "One would think," said Mr Boan, shaking his head, "that Mother 'ud never had a child of her own."

The child was a lively, rough, noisy little thing, full of the kind of mischief that irritates an onlooker, and the sight of his mother's obsession with it filled Eddie with irritation and despondency. She could barely greet him before she was turning away to play with this little girl, and he realised that she was only giving half an ear to what he was saying—though it was months since she had last seen him—while occupied more closely in listening to the child's prattle.

"That settles it," thought Eddie. "I'll go right away—away from home and away from Innsbury Royal and try a new life somewhere else."

Yet so lacking was he at this time in the will to make any effort that he allowed weeks to drift by, thinking, I'll go when the summer comes. But before the summer came Innsbury Royal had its first visitor in years.

Sharples opened the door to a stranger who had driven up in a hired carriage. This was Major Clyde Kinryce, who announced himself as her ladyship's nephew, a man in the early forties, of military appearance and a smart, confident manner.

"Inform her ladyship, Edward," said the butler, and Eddie carried the news to the south parlour, where Lady Meade was sitting. The announcement caused surprise.

"Show him in," said Lady Meade. "I know who he is. Nephew indeed! He's nothing but a cousin three times removed."

The visit caused a sensation in the servants' hall.

"It's easy to guess who *he* is," said Cook. "He's the heir, turning up to look for his prospects, and calculate how long before the old lady snuffs it."

"That's where you're wrong," said the butler. "The house isn't entailed, I do know that, so she can leave it to anybody she likes. As for her money, I'd say the same. Of course, if he's her only relative, he's bound to have ideas. Who wouldn't?"

"I don't blame him," said Mrs Naples, "but if there's one thing I

hate, it's seeing a fortune going to them that hasn't done a thing to deserve it. What's he done, this Major So-and-so? Why, I've done more for her ladyship in a week than he's done in his whole life."

"You weren't thinking you'd get her fortune, were you, Mrs Naples?" asked Alfred

"Don't make silly remarks. Nobody knows anything about her ladyship's will, though it's hoped she hasn't forgotten her servants. We've all been with her a long time. I've been here fifteen years; you nearly as long, Mr Sharples. It's customary in a case like ours to expect a little remembrance, and I'm not ashamed to say so. When Sir John Taylor died—and mind you, I'd only been there for three years, as housemaid—I got ten pounds and a pound for every year of service. The housekeeper and butler got fifty pounds a-piece, and with their years of service, too, it came to a nice sum."

"How you do go on about money!" said a cheeky young maid.

Mrs Naples glared at her. "We'll have a little less uppishness here, if you don't mind. You, Hetty, can go and get the gentleman's room prepared, for I don't doubt he's staying. Put him in the red room next to her ladyship, and mind you air the bed. It hasn't been slept in for about fifty years, and it'll be crawling with damp. George!"—to the boot boy—"go and light a fire for Hetty in the red room and be quick about it, and be careful how you do, because if there aren't rooks' nests in that chumney, my name isn't Arabella Naples."

"He'll be getting round her now," said Cook. "I'd give ten years of my life to hear what they're saying. Why don't you nip up there, Mr Sharples, and see if they want anything? You might overhear some titbits."

"Thanks, Mrs Blinders," said the butler; "I'm not given to doing things that's beneath me. And if you ask me, the old lady's a match for anybody."

"These military fellows——"

"Military fellows or anybody else. If her ladyship gets an inkling he's after her money, she'll deal with him like Her Majesty with Mr Gladstone."

In Lady Meade's room, had they known it, the conversation was harmless enough.

"Well, aunt," said the Major, "you must be very surprised to see me."

"Surprised is hardly the word. I didn't know you existed," said the old lady. "And 'aunt' is no way to address me. I have no nephews. Which cousin's son, or grandson, are you?"

"I believe that my mother was the daughter of your cousin, Sophia Trimmingham."

"Oh, I remember Sophia. She died forty years ago at least, and I've never given her another thought. And where do you come from?"

"I live in London," said the Major. "I'm married. I happened

to be in this part of the world, and I thought, why shouldn't I go and see Lady Meade? So I came, just to look you up. You've got a fine place here."

"Ah yes, it's worth seeing. I suppose you'll stay for luncheon?"

The Major coughed. "I had thought of staying a night or two, if you don't mind, aunt—I mean——"

"All right, all right, call me 'aunt' if you want to. Heaven knows what else you could call me. Stay if you wish; the place is big enough. We'll have luncheon together, and then one of the men can take you to see the horses. All gentlemen seem to want to look at horses. I don't know why. To me a horse is just a thing that pulls a carriage, and provided it's a good colour, what else matters? Do you play cribbage?"

"No, aunt. Afraid not."

"My footman does, but I'll spare him for once to show you round the house. That might pass the time for you. And if I feel strong enough I'll show you some of my treasures collected from all over the world. That ought to be sufficient entertainment for a visitor. When you've seen all that, you may feel like leaving."

"Thank you, aunt; I take it very kindly of you, and I will not outstay my welcome."

"He seems a decent enough fellow, Bliss," said the old lady, as though Major Clyde Kinryce were not in the room. "We're unused to relations, aren't we?—but I suppose it is customary to pay visits to one's kin. But we can't go on talking to him for ever. What shall we do with him until luncheon?"

"Oh, please don't bother about me," cried the Major. "I can go out and have a stroll in the park."

"That's a good idea," said Lady Meade.

Catching sight of the Major strolling along the terrace, Alfred said, "She's soon got tired of him!" Eddie, too, was watching the Major, but his thoughts were different. He was thinking, Here is someone from another world. I wonder if this is my chance—if I dare ask him——

Being human, the three men servants naturally listened eagerly at luncheon lest any hint of the purpose of the Major's visit might be dropped; but there was little or no conversation beyond polite comments on the weather, with vast spaces of silence between. The guest appeared to enjoy his meal immensely, though when he had first entered the huge dining-room with the table laid for sixty he had given an understandable start. But he made no comment.

He spent the greater part of the afternoon round the stables, and after tea—which he took with Lady Meade—Eddie was ordered to show him the house.

"No more empty bedrooms, if you please," said the Major in a very affable way. "They give me the shudders. Could it be more cheerful down below?"

"Hardly, sir. Her ladyship wishes to show you the drawing-rooms herself, tomorrow. That's where she keeps all her museum pieces. But you might like to see the ballroom and the library and the conservatory."

"I'll see anything once. Lead on."

The vast apartments were inspected without any enthusiasm on the visitor's part.

"You mean to say that nobody ever comes in here from outside?"

"I've been here three years, sir, and you're the first visitor we've entertained."

"I should think you'd all go melancholy mad."

"In a way we do, sir. But there's something about her ladyship——"

"You're right there. I've had half a day of her, and I feel like a rabbit waiting for the serpent to tighten its coils. This is quite an experience. I say! It must cost a fortune to keep this place going. How much—but you wouldn't know. It's a funny thing—what did you say your name was?"

"Edward, sir."

"It's a funny thing, Edward, how all the money in the world gets into the hands of those who don't know how to use it. If I had a place like this, do you know what I'd do with it?"

"No, sir."

"Well, never mind. But I'd put a bit of a kick into it. That I would! It still beats me how a young fellow like you can stick it."

"I can't, sir! I—I wondered——"

"You wondered if I'd employ you myself and give you a better time? See what a mind-reader I am. But I can't do it, Edward, though I've always wanted a good man-servant. I haven't got the money. Between you and me, I'm in the state of every retired officer, flat broke."

"That's a pity."

"Pity? It's a damned shame. And now we're back where we started from, and the money with the wrong people. What do we do next?"

"It's almost time for dinner, sir."

"Dinner! Good God! Is that when the other fifty-eight guests arrive? Yes, I counted those damn covers; there was nothing else to do."

"There aren't any guests," said Eddie. "We lay it like that for every meal."

The major groaned. "A mad-house!"

"Oh no, sir. Her ladyship knows very well how she likes things. And after dinner she always retires at once to her room. I was wondering where you would like to sit?"

"Now, where would you advise? In the middle of the ballroom, with a hundred or so empty gilt chairs round me to make me think I've got company?"

"What about the library?" said Eddie, who was beginning to like the Major. "I could light you a good fire, and the chairs are comfortable, and there's plenty to read."

"I doubt that. There's plenty—but I'd hardly find it readable. Still, light the fire and I'll make the best of it."

Later, an armful of logs made a good blaze in the library grate, and in a huge chair the visitor settled down with his legs extended.

"Now there's just one thing I want to complete my dream of comfort, Edward. Would there be such a thing in this mausoleum as a bottle of whisky?"

"Why yes, sir. There's whisky and everything you could name in the cellar. I'll just ask Mr Sharples to bring you a bottle up."

"Make it two, Edward, there's a friend. One bottle looks a trifle austere in a house where they lay covers for sixty. Two, Edward, I beg you. Then I can carry one of them upstairs for a bedfellow. That room they've put me in makes me think of my latter end, dark as a tomb and smelling like one."

Eddie brought the two bottles of whisky. "Is there anything else, sir? Shall I drop in later and make the fire up?"

"Edward, I like you very much indeed. No, there are plenty of logs and I'll do my own stoking. I'm not used to being waited on. Now get to your wretched bed and sleep like a little child. Good night."

"Good night, sir."

"Wait——" Kinryce put his hand in his pocket and took out a half-sovereign. "This is for you."

"Oh no, sir."

"Why, what's the matter with you? Don't you like tips?"

"But you said——"

"Really, your delicate concern for my pocket does you credit. I've never met anybody like you, and if I could take you home with me I'd do it like a shot. Take the money, I'm not as badly off as that."

"Thank you, sir. Good night, sir."

Eddie was first in the library early next morning. The fire had burned out and the hearth was overflowing with ashes. An empty whisky bottle stood on the side table beside an overturned glass; the other bottle had disappeared, doubtless having gone to bed with Major Clyde Kinryce. A pipe had fallen into the middle of the hearthrug, and its burning dottle had charred a great patch.

He'll be setting the place on fire next! thought Eddie, beginning to clear up.

And that, on the third night of his visit, was precisely what the Major did.

It was the only way of accounting for the great fire at Innsbury Roval, for it certainly started in the library, and the whole of that

immense room was ablaze before anyone noticed the crackling and the smoke.

The butler first got wind of it, for his bed was under an open window and he woke choking, and wondered why the air was so thick. Then he smelled smoke, and jumped out of bed. He leaned out of the window, and saw the angry scarlet and the tongues of flame that leapt through the shattered panes of the ground floor.

"Fire!" yelled Mr Sharples, reaching for his clothes.

What an age it took to wake people up, to make them realise something was wrong! Soon a dozen people were roused, into a state of panic.

"Where is it? . . . It's the library . . . it's the ballroom . . . it's both . . . it's the whole wing. . . . Oh, save us, look at the smoke!"

A stable boy was off on an unsaddled horse to summon the fire brigade from Shrewsbury. Meanwhile a string of servants was lined up to fill buckets at the pump, and pass them down to Alfred and Eddie, who flung the water into the inferno with about as much result as if it was nothing at all.

"Her ladyship!" gasped Mrs Naples "Where is she?"

Eddie rushed into the house and up the stairs, wondering how he was going to have the nerve to burst into that regal bedroom, but as he approached the door it opened and Lady Meade stood there, fully dressed and dignified.

"What is all the shrieking about?"

"The house is on fire, m'lady "

"I am well aware the house is on fire. That is obvious, or why should I have dressed myself? I asked, what is all the shrieking about? I can think of no situation in life in which a person requires to shriek. And where is my fool of a maid who has not arrived to dress me? And where is Miss Bliss? Sleeping like pigs, no doubt. Go and wake them I am quite capable of walking down the stairs by myself and out of the front door "

Miss Bliss and Lady Meade's maid were, incredibly, fast asleep. Eddie woke them with the news, and left Miss Bliss in a fainting condition in the arms of the terrified maid. Then he went to call the Major.

"The house is on fire, sir "

"It only wanted that," said Major Clyde Kinryce. He looked fuddled and heavy, and an empty whisky bottle stood beside his bed. In the midst of the disturbance Eddie could not help reflecting that this was the sixth bottle in three days, and if there was to be any blame for the fire breaking out he had a good idea as to where it should be apportioned, but he only said, "Can I help you, sir?"

"No. I'm coming. Damn it, where are my boots?"

By the time the fire brigade arrived a good ninety minutes later it was obvious that they might as well have stopped at home, for the small engine drawn by two horses might have coped with a few ricks

or a farmhouse outbreak, but was helpless in the face of such a conflagration as this.

"Can't do nothing when it gets a fair hold," said the chief fireman. "What a place! Like a whole town burning."

He then asked whether anybody wanted saving, as the ladders were handy; but everybody was out. It was a good thing, too, for when morning dawned only a third of that monstrous place was left standing, and the firemen were playing their hoses on ruins that would smoke and smoulder for days. The library with its thousands of volumes was gone, the ballroom was gone, the great drawing-rooms with all their priceless contents were gone, the long corridors of empty bedchambers above were gone and the roofs had crashed in; the wine cellars were buried under hundreds of tons of debris, the main entrance with its Corinthian pillars was gone, and the vaulted hall, and the dining-room. All that was left was the east wing, standing up stark and lonely on the borders of desolation.

Lady Meade had never left the scene. Sir John Wenlock had sent his carriage from Wenlock Park to bring her there, but she refused to go. Far back on the lawn she sat in a chair that had been dragged out of the hall, and watched her life's possessions go up in a blast of smoke and flame. She was still there when daylight came, wrapped in carriage rugs, a grotesque figure yet awesome in her dignity.

"All gone," she said. "Nothing saved. I shall never see my treasures again—but then, neither will anyone else. Edward!"

"Yes, m'lady?"

"I shan't forget that you saved my life."

"But I didn't, m'lady. Mrs Naples sent me for you, and in any case you were up and dressed."

"You came, which was more than anyone else did. What a sight this is! There can't have been anything like it since the morning after Nero fiddled above blazing Rome. What destruction!"

"I suppose it's all insured, aunt?" said Kinryce, who, to do him credit, had never left Lady Meade's side.

"I suppose so. I leave such matters to my agent. But what can a sum of money mean to me at my age? I'm eighty-three. . . . I suppose we shall never know how it started—somebody's carelessness I'll be bound."

No one spoke. Eddie had his own ideas about how it started, and the Major may have suspected.

Mrs Naples and the lady's-maid, Connor, came fussing round.

"Your ladyship, you must please let us get you away now. You'll get your death. They're kindly expecting you at Wenlock Park."

"I wonder she's lived through it," said Connor.

"You'd be surprised what I've lived through," said Lady Meade. "Don't be hysterical, Connor. What did you expect me to do? Swoon—and pass away with a few pretty gestures? Where's Bliss?"

"Miss Bliss collapsed, m'lady, and they've taken her to the hospital at Shrewsbury."

"More fool she. I never in my life had any use for people who collapse in an emergency. But I suppose I can't stay here for the next three weeks, though I don't relish an enforced stay in somebody else's house. Have I got any clothes, Connor?"

"I saved a big bundle, m'lady, wrapped in a bed-sheet. Your sables, and the jewellery, and——"

"Pah! Well, I've had my fill of gazing on this scene of woe. Give me your arm, Edward, and I'll suffer myself to be removed to any horror that awaits me at Wenlock Park."

"You're sure you wouldn't like me to call the doctor to attend you, m'lady? He's here, waiting to be summoned."

"Then tell him he can just go home again, and deliver the brats that have been waiting to come into the world while he was gallivanting here, having a close view of what doesn't concern him."

Within a few weeks, by Lady Meade's orders, the east wing had been made reasonably habitable, and defiantly she moved in.

There had been shocks. The estate agent disappeared on the night of the fire and was never traced, which was not surprising when it was discovered that the insurance premiums had not been paid for four years, though appropriate sums had been debited from the estate books. Innsbury Royal was gone, and not a penny would ever be recovered from the ruins.

"What does it matter?" said the old lady after her first outburst of blistering rage. "What would I have done with all that money? Built a new Innsbury Royal? Travelled the world for more beautiful things to put in it? At my age!"

Major Clyde Kinryce had left after the fire. Miss Bliss had not returned and was now in a home for incurables, her collapse having turned out to be a paralytic stroke. A depleted staff of servants made the best of domestic confusion.

"If that lot didn't kill her," said Alfred, laying her ladyship's luncheon tray with an odd assortment of salvaged silver, "nothing will. She'll see a hundred. She'll probably see us all out."

"When her sort get over eighty," said Mr Sharples, "they never die. You have to shoot them."

The fire did not kill Lady Meade, nor did it much impair her health. She died eleven weeks later of a chill brought on by sitting in a cold church. She would not even have gone to church that day at all, had not her maid insisted that with all that snow and ice about it was not fit for her to do so.

Her death was a shock to the household, and more was to follow. Lady Meade left no will. What remained of Innsbury Royal was fit for nothing but to be pulled down. The estate was divided and sold among local farmers. When all duties had been paid, the money was equally divided among the next of kin, who turned out to be a handful

of people about as closely related to her as Major Kinryce, who was one of the beneficiaries.

A few days later he put in an unexpected appearance. Eddie, who opened the door to find him standing there, was amazed.

"Oh, there you are, Edward. It's you I'm after. Get your things, and come with me."

"Sir!"

"All right. Cut out the drama. I told you I'd like to have you for my servant if I could ever afford to, and now, thanks to this wind-fall, I'm here to fetch you. I suppose you're wanting another situation? Don't look so open-mouthed; it doesn't suit you."

"You want me to go to London with you? To London!"

"What's so strange about that?"

"Nothing, sir. I'd like to come. But can I go home first and see my parents to say good-bye?"

"I suppose you can, though it seems a lot of nonsense to me. You're not going to the ends of the earth. How long will it take you?"

"A day."

Kinryce arranged for Eddie to be driven to Tourlock; and he himself picked him up there at night to drive to Shrewsbury, where they were to catch the London train in the early hours of the next morning. As they drove through the quiet midnight, the whole countryside seemed to be full of the sound of bells, and in every village church the chimes were pealing.

"What is it?" asked the Major. "Am I going mad? Why, blast me! It's the new year! It's the new century! It's nineteen-hundred! Edward, this needs a celebration! The first inn we come to——"

"I shouldn't celebrate too long, if I were you, sir," said Eddie dryly. "We've got a train to catch."

"Oh? Spoil-sport, are you? Aren't there other trains? One thing's certain: we'll never see another century. It would give me quite a lot of pleasure to drink you under the table, you and your smug effrontery."

"I don't think you'll do that, sir," said Eddie. "But I wouldn't mind a glass of beer, seeing it's nineteen-hundred, and I'm on my way to London."

Chapter 3

I

MRS CLYDE KINRYCE was a handsome woman in the late thirties, with a frigid manner that was never relaxed. So cold was she that she gave an impression of intense haughtiness, and her presence maintained a sombre atmosphere in the house at Haverstock Hill,

only enlivened by the Major's noisy and buoyant personality, which seemed impervious to any damping effect.

The house was a small one, of a typical London type, and very different from any that Edward—as we must now call him—had known. It was a three-storey house with basement, and had a long balcony of wrought-iron on the drawing-room floor. The kitchens were in the basement, and there also was the cook's bedroom. On the ground-floor were the study, the dining-room, the butler's pantry, and the cloakroom; on the first floor the drawing-room, Mrs Kinryce's bedroom, and behind, Major Kinryce's room. On the third or top floor was a guest room, Edward's room, and the room of the elderly maid.

Accustomed to the huge staffs of country houses, it was strange for Edward to live in a London bijou residence where only two women were employed besides himself. There was no grandeur here, no livery, no extreme of formal service; the Major, in fact, treated him with great informality, liked nothing better than to chat with him, and would often ask him to sit down and relax over a drink. Edward was abstemious by nature and by choice; it was not for him to question his employer's habits.

He learned from the cook that she, like himself, was newly engaged, "since the master came into money", and that previously Mrs Kinryce had run the house with only the maid, Grace, and a char-woman.

The cook was a capable Cockney girl, of sturdy independence, who resented any unnecessary intrusion in her kitchen; the maid was fiercely house-proud and inclined to be taciturn. Edward would have been lonely except for his friendly relationship with his employer, which went far beyond the accepted terms of master and man, especially as they were interpreted at the beginning of the century. Whether or not he was making a favourable impression on Mrs Kinryce he had no idea. He had little personal contact with her, and her attitude to him seemed to be almost that of a woman in a restaurant to the strange waiter who serves her meal. Distant, passive, barely noticing.

Mrs Kinryce gave the impression that the change in her fortunes had left her without occupation, which was indeed the case. With the running of the house and much of the cooking, she had at least been busy; now she had apparently nothing to do, and, not being a lazy woman, she accepted her enforced leisure with bewilderment rather than pleasure. She rose early, and after breakfast would spend a long time in arranging the drawing-room flowers to her liking, then she would sit there and sew or read a little until lunch. After lunch a stroll, and to an observant watcher the back of the long, elegant figure with its tilted parasol would have been eloquent of a listless failure to come to terms with life.

She would return for tea, and sometimes a woman friend would

call and take it with her. She rarely went out in the evenings, but would do endless embroidery, for which she obviously did not care, or would sit—very upright—her hands folded, as though lost in thought.

Edward had never seen this woman relaxed, nor in his presence had she ever smiled. To him she was a phenomenon, and after the first few weeks he accepted her for what she was, and in his heart pitied the Major, who showed no sign of needing pity. Talk between husband and wife at meal-times was desultory and unrevealing. But one evening, after clearing dinner and serving coffee, which they were taking at the dining-room table, as he washed up Edward could not help overhearing the conversation that came clearly through the ventilator between the dining-room and his pantry.

He heard Kinryce say, “—and so, just to please you, I paid those bills, and now I haven’t a care in the world, and I’ll begin to enjoy my own money.”

“You’ve never told me, Clyde, how much money you are to have from your aunt’s estate. You say we’re living on an advance of a few thousands, but——”

“My dear Gwen, don’t you know that a man never tells his wife how much money he has?”

“I would be obliged if you would take me seriously; I am not being facetious. I have a right to know.”

“But I don’t know myself, Gwen, and that’s the truth. The estate isn’t wound up yet; I’ve told you that.”

“You must have an idea. Is it in the region of ten thousand? Or thirty? Or fifty?”

“Nearer fifty, I should say. The old girl left getting on for half a million, and there are eight to share what’s left when the death duties and outgoings are settled.”

“What are you going to do with the money?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea.”

“Please don’t dismiss my question in that offhand way. I asked you, what do you propose to do with the money?”

“Oh, give me a chance, Gwen. How do I know?”

“Don’t tell me you have no plans. I know exactly how your mind works.”

“All right.” The tone became affable, almost ingratiating. “I’ll tell you what I’m going to do with part of it, tomorrow. I’m going to take you to Cartier’s and you’re going to choose yourself a very nice present. A really good piece—say, a brooch. I don’t care if it costs a thousand pounds.”

“How you do look to the future! So if ever the time should come again when you’re ‘embarrassed’ there will always be ‘Gwen’s brooch’, just as there were ‘Gwen’s pearls’ and ‘Gwen’s mother’s bracelet’.”

“I might have expected that from you. Well, just to show you

you're wrong, I'll give you the thousand pounds. In hard cash. Any comment on that?"

"Yes. It's a nice gesture, after the way you ran through *my* eight thousand after we were married."

"I might say, what is a wife's money for, except to tide over the first years?"

"I could answer even that. But you haven't answered my original question: what are you going to do with this fortune of yours?"

"Oh God! Are you going to rattle this bag of stones at me for the next five years? If you must know, I thought of starting a business."

"What kind of a business?"

"A profitable business."

"I asked you, what kind of a business?"

"There are only two kinds of businesses: profitable ones and unprofitable ones."

"I am disgusted with you."

"Gwen"—the voice had lazy amusement in it—"let me remind you that a man's business is no concern for a lady."

"Your kind of business——" The voice stopped abruptly, and Edward, to his relief, heard no more. He had hated the enforced role of eavesdropper. It was apparent that Mrs Kinryce had, or imagined she had, a grievance against her husband. That did not impress Edward overmuch, for he knew something about difficult wives. Mr Loxwell, the popular vet at Tourlock, had married Miss Moston, who was beautiful, finicky, and moody, and she was always telling people how mean he was to her and what bad habits he had, which she could hardly hope to get away with in a small village where she and her husband were both known so well. Mrs Kinryce had already shown herself to be a difficult woman; she might even be unbalanced. Edward had already realised that she did not care for his presence in the house, she sometimes behaved as if she disliked and resented him.

On the other hand, nobody could help liking the Major. He was so gay and affable, and he had gone all the way to Innsbury Royal to bring Edward to London just because Edward had expressed a wish to come. He could easily have got a man-servant in London. Edward would always be grateful to him for that, though in the shrewd depths of his mind he realised that, to say the least of it, Kinryce had a lot of faults. He drank too much whisky, though it didn't seem to affect him, which Edward always understood was a sign of a real gentleman. He had a way, too, of poking fun at the rigid code of ethics and moral behaviour in which Edward had been brought up. "The country boy!" he would say. "The typical country boy. Poor but honest, and hats off to the vicar."

"Well, what's wrong with that, sir?" Edward would say cheerfully.

"Nothing, Edward my boy, nothing at all. But it won't get you anywhere."

"It's got me here."

Kinryce seemed to find this very funny. But he always spoke to Edward as if he genuinely liked him, and it was obvious that—by some attraction of opposites—he did, and Edward felt a strong loyalty to his employer, which it would take an awful lot of bad behaviour to shake.

He had a good job, and he considered himself lucky.

It was Mrs Kinryce who paid the household accounts. She was extremely business-like, and wrote every item down in a book. On Saturday mornings she went to the kitchen to pay the wages. Unsmilingly and without a word she would place the exact amount in Edward's hand.

"Thank you, madam," he would say, but she never made any reply. At least, thought Edward, she never questioned the amount, which in that year of 1900 seemed inordinately large for a young man in his position.

The Major had said, "About your wages. What were you getting at my aunt's place?"

"Seven shillings a week when I left."

"Then I'll give you three times that."

"But that would be twenty-one shillings, sir!"

"What of it?"

That was the Major all over. He never tried to get anything cheap—not if it was something he really wanted.

2

Twenty-one shillings a week. And Edward had a whole half-day holiday once a week too. His first visit was always to the Post Office, where he put five shillings into his savings account. He also bought a ten-shilling postal order, which he sent to his father. He was the only one of the family to be in a position to help his parents in this way, and they appreciated this large addition to the cottage budget.

Coming out of the Post Office, Edward was free of London. He discovered the city by degrees, at first afraid of its vastness and keeping near to home, gradually travelling far into fascinating places. Westminster Abbey, St Paul's, the Horse Guards, the Tower—these were the first sights to thrill him. Then he came to love the London bridges and the surge of Thames below. The smaller churches of the City began to delight him, and many a verger was pressed to answer questions from this eager, inquiring young man.

Then came the museums, the art galleries, and in summer the parks, or an exciting excursion into dockland. He found that he could stand for hours watching the ships in the Pool of London. Strange smells, strange sounds, foreign faces. To see a ship sail—ropes cast off, final salute of the bearded mate, last staccato ping-ping of the engine-room bell as she slid noiselessly down the tide—

gripped his imagination and brought him to a state of ecstasy. He would go where the sailors went, into queer little eating-places, talking to the strangest characters, learning something from all kinds of people. Squalor, dirt, swagger, hint of adventure, bustle, and brawl, all were rich and strange to the young man from the English countryside. He watched and wondered and learned still more. In an easy-going, casual manner he talked to anyone he came across: publicans, tramps, foreign sailors who had only a smattering of English, hoary old seamen, children, dock officials, women who begged him for the price of a drink—and got it—touts, shopkeepers.

Other days he would sit on a bench in a London Square and see the richer world go by—richer in quality, perhaps, not in interest. Carriages, coachmen, nurses in the perambulator parade, old toffs, young dandies, smart officers, beautifully dressed women in trailing silks with flower-garden hats on their heads. The *beau monde*. Here were other scents, giving this place its own flavour: the smell of warm, groomed horse-flesh, of dust, of aromatic shrubs and prim flowers, of cooking meats in basements and sharp, mouth-watering coffee, of women's perfumes stealing on the air as the silken skirts swished by.

"Where do you get to on your days off?" asked Kinryce as Edward folded and hung his suits.

"I just walk about, sir."

"You just walk about! Good lord! how deadly. I'd no idea—we must alter all that——"

"Please don't trouble, sir," said Edward firmly, with a cheerful grin. "I love it. It's better than books, better than painted pictures. It's seeing life."

This sent Kinryce into hysterics. Edward wondered what he had said.

"My poor Edward! It's a crime against nature to bring up a boy as you were brought up, as simple as a new-laid egg. What's the matter with you? Are you incapable of breaking out? I'd have thought your own instincts would have revolted against all those worn-out creeds and irrelevant rules of conduct that they burdened you with when you were a helpless kid. I brought you to London to enjoy yourself; I can introduce you to any form of enjoyment that was ever invented for man; there's nothing so bizarre and exciting that I don't know where to find it. I'm only waiting for you to show a bit of interest; leave the rest to me, it'll be a pleasure."

"But you don't understand, sir. I'm not that sort of chap. I mean, I'm not against anybody enjoying himself in his own way—that's his affair—but I know what suits me and I don't need any help, really I don't. I suppose you think I'm a silly village yokel, to be thrilled by what you'd consider nothing at all. Everything's thrilling to me, here in London. The buses and the shop windows and the big buildings. I never had much education, though I always

wanted it. Now I'm getting something of what I missed, and it's a wonder to me."

"Edward, believe me, it can't last Not such naïveté."

"Such—what, sir?"

"I mean, you're a child."

"I don't think so, sir. Oh no, I'm not a child. I don't see things as a child would. I know very well what I mean—and what you mean. But it's not my cup of tea at all, if you'll forgive me for putting it like that. I don't know how to talk like a gentleman would, and therefore you probably think I'm a bit soft. I'm not soft, Major Kinryce!" And indeed at that moment his eyes were as hard and challenging as those of a young lion.

"Ah well. One of these days you'll suddenly feel an urge to taste life. That'll come. And when it comes, I'll be here. Don't be afraid to tell me."

Edward gave him an innocent stare.

"I must be an awful disappointment to you, sir "

"No, no. You intrigue me. I study you, Edward; you're an entertaining study."

"Entertaining? Thank you, sir."

"Blast you!" Kinryce broke out. "You stand there looking so smug——"

"I'm not smug," said Edward hotly.

"I tell you, you're smug. You're a damhed prig, aren't you?"

"I don't think so."

"My word, I'd like to know what goes on behind that pretty brow of yours. I'd just like to know. I'll find out."

"There's nothing much, sir. Nothing that would interest you."

Kinryce stared at him.

"Do you ever look at girls, Edward?"

"Sometimes."

"Well, there you are, then. Get yourself a girl. It'll do you good."

"I don't like girls."

"Liar!"

"But I don't. Someday I might like a girl, but if I do she won't be an ordinary girl at all. She'll be something quite different. You can keep all the ordinary run of girls; I haven't time for them."

"You're saying all this stuff to provoke me, aren't you?"

"Not at all."

"Edward, if *you* were an ordinary young man I'd have no use for you. I'd sling you out."

3

Two or three times a week Edward had the job of sitting up for his employer and putting him to bed. Kinryce was usually sufficiently conscious to rouse himself and mutter, "Don't you tell my wife where I've been!"

Edward would not have thought of telling Mrs Kinryce anything, let alone where her husband had been—if he had known it himself, but he did not. When it was disclosed to him, he was shocked to the core. He hadn't known such places existed. But it wasn't his business; he was doing his job. And now he knew all about Kinryce he also knew exactly where he stood.

4

In the summer Kinryce often went to the races, and if he was not joining friends, would sometimes take Edward with him.

These were red-letter days. They would set off early in the morning and travel to Epsom or Newmarket by train, and then take a smart hired trap to the race-course.

"How do you like this?" Kinryce would say, waving his whip to take in the whole of a sun-swept county, the green, the blue, the gold.

"Very much, sir. I never saw so many dog-roses in the hedges; it reminds me of our lane at home where I used to play with my sister when I was a little chap."

"And what happened to your sister? Was she another innocent like you?"

"I suppose she was, sir. She's dead."

"That's a pity. And look, Edward—when we're out together like this you can drop the 'sir'. It makes me feel uncomfortable. We're men together. Understand?"

"Thank you—sir."

"Just thank you is enough."

"It's very kind of you."

Kinryce laughed. "You sound so whole-hearted about that, it touches me to the core. Really, Edward, you'll have me in tears in a minute."

They drove on.

"Here we are! Epsom Downs. Did you ever see so many people in your life? Colour, excitement. Doesn't this beat roving aimlessly round London?"

"I wouldn't say I was aimless," said Edward.

"You're not educated yet. Now look! I'm going to put the trap in the enclosure and get a lad to look after the horse. You can go off on your own and wander wherever you like, as I shall be pretty sure to be meeting friends. Mind you put some money on the big race; that comes off at three o'clock."

"I don't know the first thing about it."

"No? It's easy. You'll soon pick it up if you watch other people. Here's two pounds. Slap it all on your fancy and make a packet. Beginners mostly do."

"I can't take that! I'll risk my own money, if you say so."

"Rot. You can pay me back out of your winnings. There are only three horses to concern you—Golden Key, Raspberry Fool, and

Chevalier, all certain to win, or so they'll tell you. All you've got to decide is, which one is actually going to win, and then plank your money on him. The bookie will do the rest. I'll introduce you to my own bookie, but I won't influence you."

"And then I lose it all?"

"Don't worry. I'll stand that. Golden Key is my own bird—but I shouldn't have said that. Meet me at the trap at five-thirty."

Edward found some interest in the horses, but much more in the people. He watched all the races, which were thrilling, but it was more thrilling still to talk to scores of people—gipsies, bookies' men, beggars, young punters yelling their heads off, old Cockney women, friendly chaps and girls, mellow old fellows who gladly gave him advice which he did not take.

The sun warmed him, and at last he found a quiet spot on the downs and lay drowsing, smelling the sweet turf, his fingers plucking at tiny flowers as his thoughts turned to his home country and he remembered how in the sun-baked fields of summer and autumn he and Maggie had lain and dreamed. He missed the last three races altogether, dimly conscious of the far-away buzz of excited crowds and the flash of colour as the jockeys went by, and the cloppity-clop of flying hooves and the muted roars from the stands. Life all around him, but just far enough away not to disturb him, this was contentment. He was very happy.

A few gipsy children were playing nearby. They came and stared at him, curious as kittens and not unfriendly. He looked at their tangled black hair, their big bright eyes, their bare hard little feet

"Hullo?"

"Give us some sweets, mister. Give us a penny, mister—nice, kind mister."

He felt in his pockets and found pennies enough to go round. Then he couldn't get rid of them; they clung to his arms and legs. He got up and chased them, and they took it as a game, delightedly shrieking as they ran and came back to tease him for more.

"Time to go home," said Edward. "Go on home, you kids"

"We *are* home."

"Do you live here?"

"Yes, there—in the tent."

"Do you like it?"

"Garn! What do you think?"

"I must go if you won't."

"Give us some more pennies, mister. Ah, go on! You got more pennies!"

"I haven't. You've got all my pennies."

They yelled, chuckled, fought one another rolling on the ground; the tiny ones squatted, picking flower-heads out of the turf.

Edward walked back to the enclosure and stood by the trap, and there Kinryce found him.

"Ah, you're there. What a day! Don't tell me there isn't a living thing called Luck—a woman, I'll bet—who makes mugs out of us. I've had a shocking day—chose the wrong one every time. And my one winner was disqualified on the worst judges' decision I've ever seen in my life. How did you go on?"

"I've been up on the downs," said Edward. "It was lovely—so warm in the sun. But I won eighteen pounds. Here's your two back, sir—and as you've lost, I'd better give you some of mine."

"Good God! You won? What on?"

"On the big race."

"You don't mean to say you backed Pinbury Wonder? But it was a doubtful outsider! Nine to one. What on earth made you do that? Somebody put you on to it? Nobody does that sort of thing for me. Talk about beginner's luck."

Edward laughed. "Nobody told me anything. I didn't care about the names of those others: the Golden Key and all that. Pinbury's a little village near where I used to live. It took my mind back. We once went there for a Sunday School treat, in a wagonette. I remember that day. tea on a farm and all the rest. I didn't care whether it won or lost; that was the only horse for my money. Here, sir, take half of it."

"I won't take a penny of it, except my stake back. You're a lucky devil. See how easy it is to make money?"

"I don't think I'll ever try again," Edward said. "It's the sort of thing that only happens once in a lifetime."

Back in the house at Haverstock Hill, Edward served Kinryce's dinner. It was nine o'clock. Mrs Kinryce had already dined and was sitting in the drawing-room, listlessly bent over her needlework. When Edward carried the coffee in Kinryce said, "What do you think of this, Gwen? Young Edward won eighteen pounds today."

"You should know what I think of it."

"Can't you be human? Show a little enthusiasm!"

"It's just beginning," she said, without raising her head.

"What is?"

"You should know."

"My wife isn't very keen on our simple pleasures, Edward. She thinks I'm leading you to the devil."

Mrs Kinryce trembled, her needle jabbed the cloth she was embroidering. Edward felt extremely uncomfortable.

"We had a very nice day, madam. I enjoyed seeing all the people. I sat up on the downs in the sun, and——"

"I am not interested in what you did or what you enjoyed." She got up abruptly, gathered her work and left the room.

"Shall I take madam her coffee, sir?" asked Edward awkwardly.

Kinryce smiled. "I shouldn't bother. I don't think she really wants any coffee. You don't know anything about women, do you?"

"I'm sorry if I've done wrong, sir."

"You never do wrong. Sometimes it isn't right never to do wrong. You'll learn. It's known as domestic bliss."

"Thank you, sir. Is that all, sir?"

"Fetch the whisky. Put it here. Turn down the gas—and another cushion behind my head. Perfect! You can go to bed."

5

In the afternoons Mrs Kinryce sometimes entertained friends to tea, which Edward would serve in the drawing-room. These friends were usually quiet people of an intellectual type, and the conversation was of books, pictures, contemporary thought. On one such afternoon, among the guests was a rather silent young man of about twenty years of age, long of face and feature, pale, with a fair lock of hair on his forehead. He spoke very little, but seemed to be on intimate terms with his hostess, for they exchanged smiles as she passed his chair. This impressed Edward, for it was the first time he had ever seen Mrs Kinryce smile at anyone.

A week or two later he spent a rainy free afternoon in the streets undecided where to go. A notice at an open doorway told him that there was an exhibition of pictures within. To get out of the rain he went upstairs into a gallery where paintings hung on the walls. He examined them with interest, trying to look beyond the mere representation to the artist's intent. He thought they were good pictures.

Presently he went and sat on the long, leather-covered bench that stood in the middle of the gallery. A few yards away a young man was sitting; they exchanged glances. It was the young man who had been to tea with Mrs Kinryce. Edward did not think it would be the right thing to show recognition, but the young man came over to him at once and sat down beside him.

"I'm sure it was you who served me with tea at my sister's house: I'm Rollin Burkley."

"I recognised you, but I didn't know you'd care to speak."

The young man smiled. His face was earnest, pleasant.

"I took a risk! What a thing to say to the wrong person!—'I believe you served me with tea at my sister's house'. I do things suddenly. Did you come to see the pictures? They were painted by a friend of mine."

"I came to get out of the rain," Edward said frankly. "For a moment I wondered if you were the artist."

"Oh no. I don't paint. I'm a law student. It isn't what I should have chosen for myself—I love the arts—but it's an economic necessity. There isn't any money in the arts, or so my father used to insist, and I have to earn my living eventually. What do you think of the pictures?"

"I like them very much."

"Do you know anything about painting?"

"Nothing at all. I've looked at a great many pictures in the big galleries. I try to imagine what the artist felt as he painted."

"That's more than most people do. They say, 'I know what I like', and usually infer, 'I don't like these'. The last thing that matters is whether one likes them, so long as the painter's soul is satisfied. The same thing applies in all the arts. Yet I don't believe in starving for an artistic ideal; I wouldn't go so far as that. Art has to be sold for money; that's one of the curses of civilisation. We are no longer in the golden age of Greece. Tell me, which of these pictures—if any—stands out for you?"

"The one I like best is the tree in the wind."

"Oh, I agree! How splendid to find someone of my own opinion for once! It inspires me to have my taste confirmed. Look, you can see it clearly from here—how the branches stream in the wind. You can feel the strain of it—it's almost unbearable—and hear the scream of the tempest. That's painting! And do you notice that although the whole thing is in browns and greys you get an impression of blazing colour? Or is that only my own idea? Am I going too far?"

"I see that too. It's the noise of it—it makes you feel you see colour where there's none."

"It's an exciting picture, and yet I know it isn't one of the painter's favourites. I wish I could buy it!"

"Are these pictures to be sold?"

"Of course!" The young man stared. "Didn't you know that?"

"I don't seem to know a lot of things I ought to know," said Edward, embarrassed. "I suppose that is how a painter earns his living. How much would a picture like that cost?"

"That one is marked in the catalogue, twenty pounds. Haven't you a catalogue?"

"I didn't know there were catalogues," said Edward. "Twenty pounds! I used to live in a house—Innsbury Royal—where there were hundreds of paintings. They must have been worth thousands of pounds. They were all destroyed in a fire."

"What did you do there?"

"At Innsbury Royal? I was a footman. It was just before I came to Major Kinryce. Lady Meade at Innsbury Royal was his relative."

"The one who left him the money? Of course! Are you doing anything special? I suppose it's your afternoon off, as they call it. Would you come to a tea-shop?"

"I'd like to very much, sir. It's kind of you."

"It isn't kind of me; I like your company. And don't call me 'sir'; I'm only a young fellow, like yourself. Call me Rollin. What's your name?"

"Edward."

"All right, Edward. Let's go."

Young and healthily hungry, they sat down to a great dish of

smoking muffins, tea, and strawberry jam. Outside the rain streamed down the windows.

"We'll stay here as long as they'll let us," said Rollin. "You wouldn't put a dog out on an afternoon like this. You're not a Londoner?"

"No, I'm from the country. Shropshire."

"A farmer's son?"

"No, my father's a gardener. He's a genius at growing flowers, but he's getting on, and the rheumatism bothers him. That's the worst of a gardener's life; when the rheumatism gets you, you're done."

"It's a sad commentary on life. Rural life must be the devil for the worker without security. Why did you come so far from your home?"

"Major Kinryce offered me the job, and I jumped at it. London!"

"The lure of London?" Rollin gave a disdainful smile. "I thought that was something that attracted the innocent in cheap novels."

"I didn't feel lured," Edward said. "My sister died, and I felt there wasn't anything any longer for me near home. At least I've seen London in a thorough way." He began to tell about his explorations, his feelings, all he had learned in the past ten months.

"I admire you for this," Rollin said. "You've seen more of the real London than I have, and I've lived here for four years."

The waitress came up and offered the bill in a marked way

"Oh, they're pushing us out—but we've actually been talking here for more than an hour. We've had good value. Will you meet me here again? Next week?"

"I'd like to very much," said Edward.

"Are you going to tell my sister we met? Or——"

"I never te—I mean, I don't talk much to Mrs Kinryce. She——"

"It's quite all right; I understand. Will it be Wednesday next week? We could meet outside the gallery."

The young man's frankness and sincerity, and the prospect of further meetings with him—of his own seeking—made Edward deeply contented. Without ever expressing, even to himself, his desire for friendship, he had wanted it, and in all his contacts with those who brushed against him in his walks he had really been seeking it, in vain. To have an appointment with a kindred spirit, a man of about his own age, was something to look forward to, a new experience for him. His life was immediately richer.

He said nothing to Mrs Kinryce about his encounter with her brother, not from any idea of secrecy, but simply because she was not a woman to whom one could talk. In the house at Haverstock Hill there was none of that camaraderie or easy relationship which usually exists between mistress and servants in a small establishment.

The following Wednesday Edward was punctually at the ap-

pointed place, and only had to wait a minute or two—during which time he felt acutely depressed lest Rollin should not think fit to come at all—before he saw him approaching.

"I've brought you a book," Rollin said, "about lesser-known places of interest in London. You'll find it immensely good, as I did, and following it up ought to give you lots of rewarding exploration. Don't hurry to return it, keep it as long as you like—a year, if you want to. It's small enough to slip in a pocket."

"Thank you very much. That's kind of you."

"Shall we walk? It's too good a day to sit in cafés."

They set off down Piccadilly, and coming to Hyde Park had all the freedom of space and open grass. Striding out where the trees almost hid the sight of the city, Rollin said suddenly, "Do you like your job? I'm curious, because I should hate it. Serving tea and so on."

"I like it very much," Edward said. "After all, I chose it. I wasn't thrust into it. My father's idea was for me to be a gardener, but I've always liked handling furniture and china and glass and silver, and keeping things in good order."

"You should keep a shop—one of those dim old shops full of lovely things."

"I might even do that some day, but I find my work too interesting to want to change. And I learned a lot about wine too, from the butler at Innsbury Royal—old Sharples. He wasn't a bad fellow—not like the butler in my first place."

Rollin nodded thoughtfully. "You've had a very different upbringing from mine. I was born in India and lived there until I was seven, then I was sent home to my grandmother, and spent the next nine years at a boarding-school. There was a big difference in age between my sister and myself. She used to write to me; there was always a strong link between us. I don't see as much of her now as I should like. Tell me—how do you find her, Edward?"

"Find—Mrs Kinryce?"

"Yes. Please be frank. Does she strike you as a happy woman?"

"I don't—I mean—she's the mistress. She's always very quiet, dignified."

"Yes, yes. But is she always so—frozen? I have to ask you this; there's no one else to ask. I'm fond of her, and now it seems I never can get close to her; that is why I've stopped going regularly to the house; and when I do go I get no pleasure from it. Once she was not as she is now, not as I knew her. I want to be convinced by someone who lives in the same house with her that the—the moods I have seen her in are only temporary, that more often than not she is in her usual good spirits."

"I haven't known Mrs Kinryce long——" began Edward uneasily.

"But you have! It may not seem long to you, but you have been there for six months. Please tell me exactly how she strikes you. It's so important."

"In the house we—that is, I and the other servants—always find Mrs Kinryce very reserved, but of course she has a right to be."

"Does she smile? Does she sing? How does she pass her time?"

"That is something that I think you had better ask Mrs Kinryce herself," said Edward firmly.

"Oh, believe me, I'm not being inquisitive! You're thinking it in bad taste that I should discuss my sister with a comparative stranger——"

"I'm her servant."

"I'm not thinking of you as a servant—don't be such an inverted snob, Edward! I liked you the minute I saw you; I knew you were the sort of person I could trust. You don't realise how vital all this is to me. Who else can I ask? She will not answer me; I've tried."

"Why don't you ask Major Kinryce?"

"Him! Of all people! Whatever she is, it's his doing. If she's in trouble, it's since she married him. There's a great deal about him that no one knows. Do *you* know?"

"Do I know—what?"

"You probably know a great deal more than you'll say. I suppose he talks to you. I believe you are on quite intimate terms," he added, with a touch of bitterness.

Edward's face tightened. "I am not going to discuss Major Kinryce with you or anyone, Rollin. His doings are his own affair, and not my business or yours."

"I see you are on his side."

"I am on no one's 'side'. I don't take 'sides'—there has never been any question of it. Major Kinryce has been very good to me, and I like him tremendously."

"He always had a great deal of superficial charm, and I know that you're a favourite of his. That won't do you any good, I assure you."

Edward stood still. "I don't like this conversation. Is this why you made up to me? To burrow into the private affairs of my master and his wife? I'm not that kind of servant."

Rollin lifted his hands and let them fall again.

"Let's sit down. . . . You're quite wrong, but you're justified in thinking as you do. I assure you, I like you for yourself, and I hadn't any ulterior motive in making friends with you, however badly things may look to you. But if there is to be any friendship between us, then I have to talk to you about the thing that is most on my mind, and that is my sister's well-being."

"But don't you see, you're putting me in an impossible situation?"

"I suppose I do see it. It's all so difficult, Edward, and you are very loyal. I feel that your loyalty is misplaced, but I can't do anything about that—not at present. I have a feeling that you don't like my sister, and that raises a barrier."

"What do you want me to say?—that I do like Mrs Kinryce?"

It doesn't get us anywhere, Rollin. I do *not* dislike her. She is my mistress and I am a servant, and our relationship is that of mistress and servant. I don't expect a lady in whose employment I am to gush over me. I admire Mrs Kinryce because she keeps her place, as I keep mine——"

"Oh, stop all this mistress-and-servant business! I have no use for such snobbery." Rollin's eyes were hot and angry, and he spoke as though his feelings shook him. "You're hedging. You're saying what you think you ought to say, what a well-trained—oh, I'm sorry. I can see that I've spoken at the wrong time—too soon. I should have got to know you better first, shown you that you could trust me, but the impulse was too strong. Can't you see that one can travel too far and too fast in friendship, and expect the other to keep pace? I won't ask you any more questions. Actually, what you *haven't* told me has confirmed my impressions. But I want you to know that my sister was once warm and charming, a sweet, companionable and winning person, never cold and secretive. A very sensitive person, abnormally sensitive. She used to write poetry—good poetry. She had great talent and was, I believe, inspired. Once her poetry was her whole life; now she doesn't write at all. Some spring in her is broken, and to an artist that is worse than having a limb torn away. I know what happened, too, for I heard indirectly. *He* made fun of her art, held her up to ridicule. He constantly belittled her, before visitors, called her such names as the 'Immortal Bard-ess'. She had published a small volume that had won the good opinion of people who really matter. He made up obscene parodies of her poems and recited them to make their guests laugh. If she had had a tougher nature she could have taken all this with a shrug, even turned the tables on him, for she wasn't without a quick wit. But she was so utterly sensitive—one of those people born to be victims of the coarse mind. It destroyed her spirit. Oh, he did it all in the most gentle joking way. Just pleasant banter, nothing to complain of. I mustn't say any more; I've already spoiled our walk. Shall we go somewhere and have tea? Get out the book I lent you, and I'll mark some of the places you ought to see."

They talked of trivial matters during tea, and after they had parted Edward was left in a good deal of perplexity and disappointment. He could not help wondering whether Rollin had really taken him up in order to pump him about the affairs of the Kinryces. In spite of Rollin's denial that this had been his motive, it looked only too likely. The very idea made Edward depressed. There had been no future arrangement for a meeting, though Rollin had scribbled his address on a card, to make contact possible.

Meanwhile the London summer slipped by, sultry and golden. Kinryce took Edward to the races again, but he would not bet.

"But why not?" The Major laughed, but with a touch of irritation. "Haven't you any feeling for sport?"

"I told you before, it's only once in a lifetime. That's the feeling I've got, and I don't go against it."

"Well——" Kinryce shrugged. "Enjoy yourself in your own way. I believe you're deep, Edward, and do a lot on the sly that I don't know about."

"That's for you to find out, sir—if it puzzles you."

"Puzzles me! You're a damned enigma. That's why I keep trying to get to the bottom of you, blast you! I'll tell you what would do you good, Edward, and that's a real night out. I'll arrange it. I know just the fellow to keep you company——"

"And who would put you to bed, sir, if I were having a night out myself?"

"You *would* have an answer. *Touché!* I'll get to breaking you wide open one of these days."

"Thank you, sir," said Edward, laughing.

He wandered about the race-course until it bored him, and then escaped from the heat and the crowds. Phew! he thought, I'd fry in there.

He left the road and turned down a winding lane which led into the deep country. There was a waft of honeysuckle scent from the hedges, and where the heavily-leaved trees met overhead the lane was darkened by cool tracts of shade. He came to a village with white cottages fringing a triangle of green, a rickety bench, a pool; a village where no one stirred in the hot afternoon; a little general shop, a forge, a church. It reminded him of Tourlock. Were all English villages so much alike? He could have felt at home here. The dusty road brought him to a squat inn. On an outside iron seat he sat down and ordered a glass of beer, brought by a small boy who carried it with anxious care.

"I haven't slopped it over. That'll be tuppence."

"Thank you. And here's a penny for yourself. Is it always so quiet here?"

"In the afternoons. It wakes up at night."

It does? he thought. To what?

He walked on. The dust whitened everything, as though the grass verges were powdered with hoar-frost. In a long and well-tended cottage garden an elderly man was rather painfully and slowly digging a trench. Edward stopped to watch him, giving way to the countryman's inborn habit of leaning and watching others work.

The old man was conscious of him; without lifting his head he muttered "Good day."

"Good day. Hot work?"

The toiler eased his back and arms. "I'm not so young as I was, that's the trouble."

"Must you do it in this heat?"

"I've got to do something, but drat this! I nearly wish I hadn't started."

"Shall I do a turn for you?"

The old man looked him up and down with slow, appraising scrutiny.

"I'd be obliged."

It was a long time since Edward had done any digging, and his muscles soon told him so, but his pride kept him at it.

"You go at it too fast," the old man said. "Easy to see you don't know nothing about digging. That's the common fault—too fast, and you're soon blown. Slow and easy, and you'll keep on all day. You a town chap?"

"No. I'm from the country—Shropshire. My father's a gardener."

"Well, didn't he ever teach you anything?"

"I didn't want to learn in those days."

"That's the young ones all over—never want to learn nothing; but they all have to come to it in the end. If you're blown you can come indoors and have a glass of the old woman's home-brewed. There's a special cake, too, today; it's my niece's birthday. She's down from London. Don't tell her I told you."

Edward followed him into a tidy kitchen, the window so full of plants in bloom that the air was greenish and dim.

"You can wash there."

A girl came into the kitchen; she was plain, pleasant of face, well groomed in a brown dress with white frills at the neck and wrists.

"This is my niece, Mary Vincent. Mary, the young man has been helping me to dig the garden. It was kind of him. Fetch him a glass, do, and a bit of your cake."

"Of course." Interest and approval had flashed into her face as she summed Edward up. She brought the ale, and a slice of iced cake on a pink plate and set them on the kitchen table.

"There! You'll enjoy those. It was kind of you to help my uncle, though he was a fool to start digging on a day like this." She looked at his dark townish clothes, and said, "Are you down from London?"

"Just for the day. I was having a walk."

"I get all the walking I want in my job," she said frankly. "I'm personal maid to a lady in the West End—in Belgrave Square. Run, run, run, from morning till night. But don't think I don't like it. She's very kind to me. Are you a business man?"

The girl was likeable, friendly, with very soft brown eyes and a ready smile. Edward said, "I'm in service with a gentleman in London."

"Oh? That puts us level."

"He's at the races. I'm joining him later. My name's—Eddie Boan."

"Well—eat your cake, Eddie. Do you like it?"

"It's very good. Many happy returns!"

"Did my old horror of an uncle tell you that? He'd say anything but his prayers." She made a laughing grimace at the old man,

showing even white teeth. Then to Edward she said, "Would you like some more cake? There's plenty."

"Oh no, thank you. It was kind of you. I must go."

She was not to be put off so easily after this lucky encounter with a good-looking and attractive young man. She said, "Do you get much time off? I mean, in London."

"Now, Mary," said her uncle. "No fishing!"

"Don't be silly, uncle." She blushed becomingly, for she was young enough to do so and she had a clear, fine skin.

"Sometimes," said Edward.

"Have you got a lot of friends?"

"I don't care for a crowd," he said, giving her an unintentional opening.

"Oh Well, perhaps—I mean, if you were ever at a loose end, I live at 87 Belgrave Square. Half-day on Thursdays, and I can sometimes manage—I mean, don't think I'm forward——"

He sheered off. She was attractive, but she had made too sudden an approach for Edward's fastidiousness. He said, "That would be nice—I'll remember the address I really must go: the Major doesn't like to be kept waiting."

They both came to the cottage gate with him. The girl waved, smiling; he looked back once and could still see the lively sparkle of her eyes before he turned the corner of the lane.

He had no intention of ever getting in contact with her. He thought the whole incident unimportant, but it was not so, though he was not destined to see Mary Vincent again for twenty-five years.

He was back at the meeting-place before Kinryce appeared.

"Oh, there you are, Edward. Had a good day? In your own smug way? I've had a wonderful day; couldn't go wrong, everything I touched came off. Talk about luck!" He had obviously been celebrating his luck already and was none too steady; fortunately the hired horse was. "Edward," he went on, "you missed the chance of a lifetime, old boy. I put a fiver—a fiver, I tell you, must have been mad—on an animal that nobody had ever heard of, and it came home like a ruddy lightning flash at sixty to one. I've made three hundred quid. Why should a fellow toil and sweat when he can make three hundred quid by falling off a log?"

"What about the three hundred quids you've lost?"

"Oh, don't be so damned realistic. You're just a bucket of cold water; I don't know why I take you out at all." He nudged Edward good-naturedly, with his debonaire, comradely laugh. "Why do I take you out, old boy?"

"That's what I keep asking myself. I suppose you want to be decent to me, and I appreciate it."

"Well, don't talk like a fifth-rate election address. By the way, I never asked you, what did you do with that eighteen pounds you picked up last time?"

"Put it in the Bank."

"Put it in the Bank! The Bank! Good God! you'll slay me. Nobody puts money in the Bank. If you want to be so thrifty, why didn't you give it to me? I could have invested it and doubled it for you."

"Invested it—in what, sir?"

The Major looked up sharply, but the brown strong-featured face was full of innocence.

6

"Have you thought of a holiday at all?"

"No," said Mrs KINRYCE.

They were at breakfast, and it was the first day of August. Edward lifted the Major's plate and passed the toast-rack and marmalade.

"Will that be all, sir?"

"No, you can get me some more of that excellent ham . . . I thought you might be thinking of visiting that aunt of yours, Gwen."

"I don't feel like going this year."

"Well, will you object if I take three weeks or so? I've got friends with a place in Norfolk."

Her manner suddenly ceased to be apathetic. "What kind of a place?"

"What kind of a place, my dear Gwen? Just a nice, quiet old country house"

"It sounds too good to be true."

He looked at her slyly. "Can it be that I detect a note of sarcasm in your usually well-bred tones? You're coming on, Gwen."

She kept her eyes fixed on her plate.

"You see I even consult you. I even ask you if you mind if I go."

"What does it matter if I mind?" she said.

For the first time Edward felt pity for her, as he would for anyone being unfairly taunted. He was always acutely embarrassed when they talked as though he were not there; he felt that mental aloofness was a part of his job that he had never learned.

"Oh come, Gwen. Make up your mind to go away yourself. Nobody stays in London in August, and you'll do yourself no good by brooding about the house. I'm always telling you that you ought to go out more and liven yourself up. A cat would get depressed living as you do."

"I prefer to stay here" Goaded, she had raised her voice a little. "I'm not interfering in anything you choose to do; the least you can do is to leave me to myself. But you'll have to give me some money. I wouldn't have needed to ask you if I'd have had any of my——"

He interrupted, "You can have all the money you want. Throw it about. That would be a change. By the way, I suppose it's all right

if I take Edward with me? You won't need three servants if you're here by yourself."

Her whole attitude stiffened, became wary.

"That would be inconvenient. Grace goes for her holiday to-morrow, and Cook is asking for hers. I can't do without Edward. I won't be left without a man in the house."

Kinryce was taken by surprise. "But that's nothing but nerves. You can't——"

"I want Edward to stay here!" Her tone was sharp and urgent.

"All right, all right." Kinryce looked displeased and baffled. "So poor Edward is to be done out of a holiday to suit your whims. Do you hear that, Edward? You're to go on guard duty. I hope you have a good strong bark. I'm leaving at once, so you'd better start packing my things."

Up in his room later Kinryce said, "So you're to be done out of a holiday because my wife chooses to be neurotic."

"I don't mind in the least, sir. On the whole, I'd rather stay in London."

"I can't believe it. You're a free agent. Why don't you strike and simply say you're coming with me?"

"I wouldn't think of doing that. Mrs Kinryce wouldn't like it"

The Major stood and stared at him thoughtfully, his hands thrust into his pockets, a baffled expression on his face.

It was quiet in the house when he had gone, and without him there seemed little work to do, even though the housemaid was away.

Mrs Kinryce took all her meals on a tray in the study, though the little she took at any one time could hardly be called a meal. Apart from her daily listless stroll, she did not go out. She gave the impression of a woman with so little worth living for that she merely surrendered to the boredom of each successive day. Although she had demanded Edward's company in the house, she hardly seemed to notice him. For all his youth and buoyancy, the melancholy atmosphere of the place began to get on his nerves. Nor did the weather help; it was very hot, humid and heavy, and London wore an air of having done with the season and given way to exhaustion.

Then one evening Mrs Kinryce broke the silence. Edward had carried in her supper, and as he turned to leave her she addressed him by name.

"Yes, madam?"

"I wanted to say it was good of you to stay when I asked you. I appreciate that."

"That's quite all right."

"If you had wanted to go, I wouldn't have stopped you. But I had a feeling that you—didn't want to go."

"It would have been all right to me either way."

Her hands moved uneasily, and the fingers of the right fastened on the thumb of the left.

"You should never have come here, Edward. It isn't a good place for you."

"No, madam? I'm quite satisfied."

"Do you understand what I'm talking about?"

"Probably I do, but it isn't anything that need be discussed, Mrs Kinryce."

"I doubted you at first," she said, "but I'm beginning to think you have a level head beyond your years. I hope you'll keep it."

"Thank you, madam."

Her hands relaxed. She said, "I feel it is very unfair that you should go without a holiday. Wouldn't you like one?"

"I didn't expect a holiday. And you need me here while you're alone."

"Oh, but that doesn't matter at all. Grace returns on Friday, and Cook can go later. I want you to go away. Wouldn't you like to go on Saturday?"

"I'd like it very much, but——"

"Then that's settled. There's no reason at all why you shouldn't go. I suppose you have somewhere to go?"

He couldn't keep the pleasure out of his voice.

"I'd like to go to my home for a day or two, and then—it's only just come into my mind, but I might go to North Wales for a few days, among the mountains."

For the first time she gave a slight smile, and her face was transformed by it. He saw that once she must have been a pretty and radiant woman.

"That sounds lovely. To be away from this dreadful hot city. Please take the tray, Edward; I really can't eat anything; it's too heavy and close. Bring me a glass of cold milk."

Full of delight, he packed his few things. He decided not to write in advance, but to surprise his parents by walking in on them. He reached home in the evening, walked up the narrow garden path and opened the cottage door. As he stepped into the kitchen, his mother, who was sitting by the hearth, gave a startled cry.

"Who is it? Oh, Eddie, it's you! What a surprise! But you've altered so, I'd hardly have known you."

"I hope it's for the better, Mother," he said, smiling and kissing her.

"You look such a man."

He thought that she, too, had altered. She looked old and bent, her sparse hair was white and untidy, and her eyes empty and weary.

"I've got a few days' holiday, Mother, so I came straight home."

"That's nice." Weak tears filled her eyes and ran down her cheeks. "I'm in trouble, Eddie; I've lost my little girl."

For a moment he thought she was harking back to Maggie's death, but it turned out that she was referring to Minnie's child.

"What do you think, Eddie? Our Minnie's such a bad girl. Four months gone she came in here—it was a Saturday—and took the

little one out with her, like she might be going to the village. And she never came back, and nobody knows where she is now. She's gone right away without a word. Four months gone! Wasn't that a cruel, wicked thing to do to me, Eddie? My little pet. I've been grieving ever since."

"It was Minnie's child, Mother. I suppose she'd a right to do what she liked with it."

"But to go off like that, with never a word!"

"No, she'd no business to do that; but you know what Minnie is. Wild as a hare. She always was like that."

"I've nothing to do but sit here and grieve, Eddie. A poor old woman like me."

"You're not old, Mother. Why, you're not sixty yet. And what's one bit of a child after the ten of your own you've had? Aren't you going to say you're glad to see me, after I've come all the way from London on purpose?"

"Yes, I'm glad to see you, Eddie; I am indeed. But it'll never be the same again, not without little Alice. All the brightness went out of my life with her going."

"Don't talk like that," said Edward, disappointed and irritated. "I've brought you some nice presents. Where's my father?"

"Gone to the village. He'll be back soon; he said six o'clock, and it's past that already."

"I'll go and meet him. You can be opening these parcels, and if they don't brighten you up I'll be really hurt."

Mr Boan was coming along the lane. His head was bent, and Edward saw him long before he looked up. He looked older than his sixty-two years, as those who labour on the soil in all weathers often do. He walked with difficulty too, as though his limbs were painful.

When he saw Eddie his face lightened with joy. "Why, Eddie boy, is it you? I thought for a minute I was dreaming. What a surprise! Have you been in the house?"

"Yes. I've got a few days' holiday."

"My, you do look well; a fair treat! They must be using you properly in London. You've got a good place?"

"Yes, it's very good."

"Eddie, that ten shillings a week, I've worried wondering whether you can really spare it. But I can't tell you what it means to us. You see, I'm wondering how long I can stop on at work; my rheumatism's so bad, there's days I can't go at all, and Mrs Firdown isn't so pleased about that. But if I could count on the ten shillings, Mother and I could live on that, with the hens and the bits of things I grow in the garden——"

"Don't worry, Father," said Eddie, touched. "You'll always get it. And I've got a bit saved up. I'm going to send you ten pounds when I get back; it'll be a nest-egg for you. What do you think, Father? I'm getting twenty-one shillings a week."

"Twenty-one shillings! Do you mean, they make you keep yourself out of that?"

"No, of course not. Twenty-one shillings and everything found."

"But I never heard of such a thing! Why, boy, I brought up my family on that. Is that what they pay in London? It must be a wonderful place."

Eddie stopped by the hedge and picked one or two early blackberries, warm from the sun. It made him think of Maggie.

"It's nice to be home," he said. "But, Father, Mother doesn't seem very well."

The old man shook his head sadly. "She isn't, Eddie, and that's a fact. She's failing. She never got over Minnie taking the little girl away. The way she was wrapped up in that child!"

"But it isn't natural——"

"You know, Eddie, she's never been quite herself since Maggie died. We just have to give in to her fancies and humour her."

Edward stayed three days at the cottage, then went on to Wales. The sight of the mountains brought him wonder and intense spiritual satisfaction. Though this magnificent country was so near his home, he had never explored it before. He took a room in a cottage at Capel Curig, and spent the still, warm days roaming over the vast shoulders of Snowdon, among the rocks and heather. When he was tired of climbing he would lie flat on his back, breathing in the ethereal air of infinite spaces close to the sky. London and his working life seemed so far away that they might have belonged to another world and another age. This was the first real holiday he had ever had, and it made such an impression on him that he carried away in his heart some secret power that he had received from it. He felt wiser, more mature when he came down from those heights.

He went straight back to London, reaching Haverstock Hill in the evening. He went into the house down the area steps. The cook was in the kitchen.

"Oh, so you're back," she said, disgruntled. "And about time. I'll be off myself on Monday, and Grace can have the time of her life with this blessed grate. It's making me old before my time."

Her words and tone, the rapid descent from pure and solitary happiness to this banal reality, irritated Edward unbearably.

"Has everything been all right?" he said.

"Why shouldn't it be all right?" she snapped. "With his lordship away, there's nothing to go wrong in this house. I'm downright sorry for the missus, that I am. Droop she may, but he'd make a palm-tree droop. I've seen a few bad lots in my time, but there are limits. And you needn't look at me like that."

"I don't want to hear what you think."

She gave a snort. "Oh, we all know you're his little pet. But you'd better be careful, a young chap like you. You can't mess about with pitch and not get it on your fingers. The money's good

here, and I suppose that's why we stay, though if anything ever comes out it won't do any of us any good. If you're going upstairs you can look in at the drawing-room and tell the missus you're back. She was asking about you. She's got that brother of hers with her."

Edward went up the basement stairs, and on up to the first floor. He felt depressed and stifled. The reaction had been too sudden.

As he mounted the stairs he heard the voice of Rollin Burkley, for the drawing-room door was ajar.

"—I think you should consider a divorce."

"Oh no! Rollin, I couldn't do that."

"You've got ample justification. And evidence."

"This horrible suspicion——"

"What you suspect is fact. I've checked up on that. You must get your freedom."

"I couldn't face it. The revelations! And even in this civilised age a divorced woman, however innocent, is looked on with suspicion—quite outside the pale. I should never be able to mix with my kind of people again."

"You'd get over that."

"Oh no. To live such a shrinking, furtive life——"

"What kind of a life are you living now?"

Edward struck his foot against the skirting-board. The voices stopped. He went into the drawing-room. Mrs KINRYCE was sitting by the window, and Rollin was standing against the fireplace.

"I just wanted to tell you I'm back, Mrs KINRYCE."

She was very white, but quiet and controlled.

"So I see. Did you have a good holiday?"

"I enjoyed it very much."

"You may tell Cook that Mr Burkley will be staying for supper. He tells me that you and he are friends."

Edward glanced at Rollin, who gave him a warm smile.

"Where did you go for your holiday, Edward?"

"I was in Wales, at the foot of Snowdon."

"The worst part of that must have been coming back! Will you meet me when you have a free afternoon?"

"I should like to very much."

When he was leaving later in the evening, Rollin said, "You must have overheard something of our conversation before you came in."

"I couldn't help it."

"It doesn't matter. You must be aware of my sister's situation. I'd do anything to get her away, but I'm helpless. At least you were willing to stay with her, rather than go with him. I'm grateful."

It was mid-September before KINRYCE returned. His arrival was like a gust of wind blowing through the still house. He was boisterous, in high spirits.

"Well, Edward? Did the watchdog have occasion to bark?"

"Everything has been quite all right."

"I hope you've been bored stiff. You deserved to be."

Edward deliberately refrained from mentioning his own holiday, lest any disparaging remarks might be made to Mrs Kinryce. His loyalty to her had awakened; he wanted to spare her distress.

The evidences of prosperity and carefree spending were to be seen in the new pigskin bags which he was unpacking. Everything was haphazardly rolled and thrust in as though not worth a cent of attention; new suits of fine cloth bearing the tags of a fashionable tailor; shooting clothes; riding clothes; silk shirts and fresh linen and expensive underwear; trifles that had caught a casual shopper's fancy, like silver-backed brushes, gold cuff-links, and jewelled tie-pins that rolled out of the tossed linen and fell on the floor.

Edward put everything neatly away, folded the linen for the laundry, and carried the suits to the kitchen to sponge and press. This kept him busy all day. When he carried coffee to the drawing-room the silent woman was sitting there with a piece of sewing untouched on her lap while Kinryce, gay and expansive, was bragging about his plans for the autumn.

"Edward, I'm going to put down a wine-cellar. Everybody ought to put down a cellar. I shall need your help."

"I don't know that I shall be a lot of use to you."

"Call yourself a butler!"

"I never called myself anything of the kind, sir."

"You have an answer for everything."

"Can I ask you a favour?" Edward said.

"Why not? That will be a change."

"I wondered if, during the winter, instead of having a half-day, I might have two evenings off? Monday and Friday. I'd lay dinner before I went out, and Grace would manage."

Kinryce gave him a knowing smile. "Now what are you up to? Something that can't be done in an afternoon?"

"Not this particular thing."

Mrs Kinryce turned her head and looked at him sharply. The Major said, "Edward, I'll be delighted. You're coming to life. Take your two evenings, and I shan't ask what time you come in."

"I shan't be late, sir. I'm only going to evening classes at the Polytechnic."

"You're—what! I never heard of such a thing. You'll slay me!"

Mrs Kinryce relaxed, and bent her head over her needlework.

"Thank you, sir," said Edward.

7

The classes had been Rollin's idea, and Edward found them fascinating. On Mondays he studied English literature, on Fridays speech and diction. Every night in his room he went over the lessons, doing his preparation till midnight.

He had reason to be grateful to Mrs Kinryce, for she had said,

"You must be able to go out in the daylight. You may take Sunday afternoons, so long as you're back to serve dinner and let Grace go out."

Thus he was able to meet Rollin Burkley, for their friendship had grown. Their conversation was mainly about Edward's classes, and they often read together and discussed books in Rollin's lodgings on wet and snowy days. These Sunday afternoons became bright spots in Edward's week. He needed such relaxation, for the tension in the house was heavy and there were deep undercurrents; a man of secret ways, and an unhappy, passive woman.

The weeks went by, and then one day when they had been reading together a book of new poetry, apparently lost in the pleasure of it, Rollin showed that his thoughts had been elsewhere, for he suddenly closed the book and broke out, "Edward, I must speak. I'm so concerned about my sister, and after all you see her every day. I hardly ever see her, and when I do she tells me nothing. I seem to have lost touch with her. How is she?"

"She's so quiet. One can't tell how she feels."

"I know. Oh, if she'd only come away. I know she has no money—he ran through all she had—but what does that matter? I should think she'd gladly starve to be free."

Edward said nothing.

"Why won't she leave him?" Rollin could sit still no longer. He got up and walked restlessly across the room and back again. "I sometimes think she still has some kind of feeling for him—that pimp! It would be possible. When she married him she was very much in love—beyond all reason—and she has the kind of deep nature that will not change, however much it is disillusioned. I can't pretend to understand, I can only worry about her. I know you don't like me to talk like this. I'm up against a barrier with you, because you like the man."

"I like him. I can't help liking him."

"And yet you know all about him, and his filthy trade. Or do you?"

"I do. And yet there's something in him—in him himself—that I like. Oh, I can't explain it. There must be something wrong with me. I know you won't be able to understand me, Rollin."

"Frankly I don't. I don't even understand why you stay in that house. It's a wretched place for you to be in, and if you'd any sense you'd leave and get another situation."

"There again," said Edward, "I must have a distorted sense of fairness, but Major Kinryce brought me to London, and as long as I stay in London I have to stay with him. That seems to me just."

"It's utter nonsense, really. You don't know what you're doing."

"I do know what I'm doing."

"He brought you here simply and solely for the purpose of making you as bad as himself."

"I don't believe it."

"You're lying. Of course you know that's true. You know also that my sister saw through him, and that all her concern has been for you. At first she thought you were a willing victim, but when she saw that you'd got strength of character, she began to lean towards you and trust you. I don't know how this is going to end."

"I'm certainly not going to leave Major Kinryce. We'd better not discuss it, Rollin. We'll only end up by having a row."

"It's an impossible situation. Very well, we won't discuss it. Have you seen anything of this doctor who is visiting my sister?"

"If you mean the man who called to see Mrs Kinryce one afternoon, he didn't say he was a doctor."

"She told me that she was seeing a doctor. It was against her own wishes, but Kinryce had insisted that she should. As if a doctor could do her any good in her state of mind! Kinryce called some fellow in. I only want to know that he seems a reasonably honest type. What did he look like?"

"I hardly noticed him. I showed him up, and down again about half an hour later. The next day a small parcel arrived by hand for Mrs Kinryce. Medicine, I suppose, if it was from this doctor."

"Will you let me know if he comes again?"

"Of course."

The doctor came every week after that, and medicine was left for Mrs Kinryce, but whether she took it or not, Edward did not know. She was apathetic, silent, and uncomplaining.

Kinryce was out a great deal, and sometimes stayed away for a couple of days at a time. He was often sulky with Edward, who worked on calmly and spent his evenings in study.

The winter passed, and one day at the beginning of April Kinryce said suddenly, "I'm sick of this country and its filthy climate. What would you say to going abroad, Edward? Ever been on the Continent?"

"You know I haven't."

"Well, you're coming with me. To Italy, next week. You can start packing my things and your own too. We'll get out of this tomb and find something a little more gay. You'll like that."

"Do you intend to close the house, sir?"

"Nothing would please me better, but Mrs Kinryce apparently intends to stay."

"Is Mrs Kinryce not going with us?"

"Don't be silly." Edward frowned, and Kinryce said, "And don't take offence. If you were married to a neurotic woman you'd understand. This will be a man's holiday, and I can promise you the time of your life. Italy! Sunshine and blue skies! I've got a house; and what a house! Beside a lake, very quiet, no intruders. Just a place for me and my friends, but I shall need you. Don't think you're going to be worked to death. You won't have much to do, really—I

have Italian servants to look after the house. You can call yourself major-domo, if you like. That's a good title!" He gave a confident laugh.

"Just as you wish, sir," said Edward.

At dinner that night the plan came up for discussion.

"Well, Gwen, it's all settled. I'm leaving for Italy on Tuesday and Edward is coming with me."

Her fork clattered down on her plate.

"You're not taking Edward with you!"

"Why on earth not? He's my servant and I need him."

"I need him here."

"Now, you're not going to get away with that again, Gwen. I know what happened in August. You sent him off on a holiday the minute I'd left—after all your stories about needing his protection. No, Edward did *not* tell me; Grace told me. So don't let me hear any more of such rubbish. If you can't stay here alone, then go off to that aunt of yours. I don't care what you do. I'm going to Italy, and I'm taking Edward with me."

Mrs Kinryce, who had been sitting with closed eyes during this tirade, looked up suddenly, at Edward. Her eyes were full of dismay.

"Edward, you have a say in this. Do you want to go to Italy?"

"Yes, madam."

"I can't believe it."

"I've never been abroad. I may never have another chance."

"But I don't want you to go! I have reasons for not wanting you to go."

"I'm sorry, madam; but Major Kinryce wants me to go."

"You really mean—you want to go?"

"Yes, madam."

She got up abruptly and left the room. The lace scarf she wore caught against her glass and dragged it to the floor. Edward stooped and picked it up.

Next day, which was Sunday, he went to see Rollin. The news that he intended to go with Kinryce to Italy was received with stunned surprise.

"Edward, you must be mad!"

"It probably looks like that to you."

"You know the sort of place he's taking you to? Quiet? I bet it is! Secluded enough for his sort of occupations."

"It's just that I want to see for myself."

"You may see too much."

"I can look after myself."

"I doubt that."

"I know I can. It must seem incomprehensible to you; but, Rollin, don't worry about me. I had to tell you I was going. Just leave it at that."

"What about Gwen? What does she think?"

"She doesn't want me to go. She was upset. I was very sorry, but I couldn't give in to her."

"She's thinking of your own good. She has a great deal of regard for you."

"I know that. But I'm going, all the same."

"I hope to goodness you won't regret it. Will you write to me?"

"Of course I will."

"And don't be too confident about yourself. He's cleverer than you are."

Edward said nothing. There seemed to be nothing to say.

8

Edward was changing for the evening. His room had cool white walls and a floor of wood-blocks polished till they gleamed, and it opened upon a balcony that ran all along the second-floor windows. He dressed slowly, for he could not keep away from that balcony with its view of a sapphire lake, unruffled under a sky of rose-flushed gold. Sometimes he thought that morning was the most beautiful time to look at the lake, sometimes evening, but he was apt to linger more in the evening because of the contrast between this cool peace and the overheated atmosphere of the salon. Italy! A dream-country, more lovely than he could ever have imagined.

His door flew open to the kick of a knee, and a young maid, a girl of provocative beauty, brought in his coffee. She showed no inclination to leave, but wandered round the room, swinging her hair and her short black skirts, examining his things and flinging him an occasional smile from over-red lips.

"Don't let me take your time," said Edward.

As she spoke no English, she took his remark as an invitation and sat down on the bed.

"Look!" said Edward. "Buzz off." The sweeping gesture he made towards the door and the threatening look that accompanied it were unmistakable; and she went away sulkily, to tell the other servants that the good-looking young English valet was really a surly lout and worth nobody's attention.

Edward finished his dressing, and with a last longing glance at the beautiful scene outside, went up to the salon, where Kynryce and his guests spent all their evenings.

The salon was a small casino on the third floor, richly furnished and carpeted in deep white velvet pile. The walls were painted with alarming frescoes which Edward's startled glance took in by degrees. A huge, glittering chandelier reminded of him of Innsbury Royal, but it looked down on a different scene from Lady Meade's empty drawing-room.

Underneath it stood the roulette table, around which crowded the dozen or so remarkable guests of the villa.

You get to some funny places, Edward thought. And people! Funnier than a farce.

Some of them had titles, too. . . . Prince . . . Contessa.

'Prince' was a man in his early forties, stout, unnaturally flushed, with a mouth like a dark gash and cold, protruding eyes. He wore three diamonds in his shirt-front, each bigger than a pea; their glitter was superb. He had small, fat fingers loaded with rings, and his nails were painted silver.

'Contessa' was a woman who might have been eighty years old. Her enamelled face was a mask round the sunken mouth and tiny eyes, like those of a vicious bird. Her white hair, sparse and dry, was knotted with scarlet ribbon; her bony yellow shoulders stuck out of a purple velvet dress which the wearer continually hitched up, as though it might fall off altogether. In between her hitchings she clawed at the baize cloth before her. Her narrow chest was hunched forward to guard her chips, as though she thought somebody might snatch them.

Next to her sat a girl of about twenty-two years old, wearing a magnificent dress of white satin embroidered with gold. Her long, oval face was sickly pale and in it burned two dilated black eyes. Her auburn hair was piled high on a small, aristocratic head. She screamed almost unceasingly: screamed when the ball came to a stop, screamed when she won, screamed quite madly when she lost.

Edward stared at her in horrified fascination. She felt his gaze, and returned it with avid eyes.

"Kimmie," she said in a lisping foreign accent, "ze beautiful new boy. I vant him."

Kinryce, cool and smiling, said, "You'll have to do your own hunting, darling."

Edward looked away quickly, but there seemed to be no reassuring person on whom to rest his gaze. Another young girl, demure of face like a nun, was dressed from head to foot in wicked scarlet that clung to her remarkable figure. Other women, *soignée*, hawk-eyed, covered with jewels, sat watching the little ball with greedy concentration; one such of dramatic height, with a pock-marked face and lovely sapphire eyes, wearing severe black velvet and clasping a small monkey in her arms, stood behind a thick-shouldered man with two livid duelling scars across his face. Another man, in a fez, and with great, wet, pendulous lips, thrust the women aside to lay down his stakes; he won consistently and raked in the chips with sprawling hands.

The heat in the room was terrific, and the air offensive with the smell of stale tobacco, cloying perfumes, women's hair, and musty clothing.

Kinryce came to Edward's side.

"Try your luck. Come along; it's good fun."

Edward leaned over, and hesitantly put down an English half-

crown on *noir*. It came up. The croupier thrust it back at him, with a yellow chip. He looked at the chip curiously, and left it and the half-crown on *noir*. It came up again. Now he had three yellow chips.

"You're getting rich," said Kinryce.

"I don't know what to do with these yellow tiddley-winks."

"You take them to the bank—over there—and get *lira* for them."

"Get—what?"

"Edward, you're hopeless!"

He mistrusted the 'tiddley-winks', so he pocketed his half-crown and left the chips lying; they were quickly appropriated by a bony, be-ringed hand.

He felt stifled, and began to cough, thinking of the cool, silvered world that lay outside and the gentle breath of an Italian spring night. If he could only escape from this exotic place, these grotesque, frenetic people, this stage farce, and walk alone on the lake shore listening to the cool lap of water among the reeds!

He and the croupier coughed in chorus, except that the croupier's cough was uglier than Edward's and sounded like a rusty ratchet.

By now the table was heaped with gold and paper money. Edward recognised English five-pound notes, and thought everybody must have gone mad. Such was the confusion that an interval was called, and at once a horrible fracas broke out, with snatching, tearing, and shrieking.

"Wotcher, cock?"

Could that possibly be the croupier speaking to him? Edward had noticed the man and thought him markedly foreign, with his match-thin, slouching body, lank black hair, side whiskers, small reddened eyes, and hoarse, mysterious chanting.

"Were you speaking to me? In *English*?"

"Cor, yes. Come from Hoxton. But I've been in this game nine years. Come out here to look after a gentleman's hosses, and got myself into the *boule* racket. That's how it started. But me cough's bad and I've got all the pickings I want, so I'm getting out of the parrot-house and you're taking over the job."

"Me!"

"Well, that's the idea, isn't it? Or so I understood from the Boss."

"Oh," said Edward. "I could do with some fresh air."

"Couldn't we all? Nip out and breathe, if you want to. Through the curtains there, and a little door'll take you on a balcony."

"Thanks," said Edward, and nipped. He stood on a tiny balcony and gazed into the wonder of the night; silvered blueness everywhere, etched with the black shapes of cypresses, and an enormous bowl of velvet sky pricked with millions of great glittering stars. The air was so warm and soft it was like a caressing hand on his cheeks; the faint scent of earth and flowers made breathing seem like

drinking a delicate wine. There was hardly a sound, just the far-off barking of a dog . . . then a distant bell with liquid notes dropping into the stillness as rain drops into a pool . . . and a tender, haunting sound that went on all the time, so low that you had to listen to hear it at all—the lapping of lake water against the shore.

I didn't know there was anything like it in the world! thought Edward. So beautiful! If I can get out here sometimes I can stick the rest.

He could have stayed for ever, but he heard Kinryce's voice impatiently calling his name.

"Edward! . . . Oh, there you are. What are you doing?" There was a hint of irritation in the tone. "Come in and watch the croupier; I want you to learn his job."

"Me?"

"Don't sound like a sheep. With your intelligence you'll pick it up in an evening."

"I can't talk that funny language!"

"He'll teach you. It's mere routine. When the game's over he can give you a lesson."

When the game's over? Did this lot never go to bed? thought Edward as the hours dragged by. His watch told him it was half-past four, and still the dazed, drugged crowd were glued to their places.

He was tired out. He felt sick. Then suddenly it was all over. The old Contessa gave a grunt and fell unconscious right across the table, scattering money and chips in all directions. Witch-like screams broke out. The young girl in scarlet grabbed a handful of chips and thrust them down her dress; half a dozen of them set on her, and she went down to the floor.

Gradually they all drifted away. The man in the fez was lying in a heap in one corner. Kinryce, cool and unruffled, dragged him out by the legs.

"And that's the lot," said the croupier. "Peace now until around noon. Hi, you"—to Edward—"give me a hand with Dracula here."

The man under the table seemed to be in a coma. He had a death's-head face, thick red lips, and was dressed in a flowing cloak of green satin linked with gold at the throat.

The croupier took his shoulders and Edward his legs; they pulled him out into the corridor and flung him on the nearest divan.

"Is *he* called Dracula?" asked Edward with interest.

"Cor, that's just my name for him. I got names for all this lot. Charlie Peace and Bloody Mary's just two of them."

"Sense of humour, eh?"

"Cock, there's two things you'll need in this job. Sense of humour, and a strong left hook to the jaw. If any of them come right at you—and the men are as bad as the women—don't stop to think. Bash 'em!" He dusted his hands. "Now come on, mate, and

I'll teach you the bag o' tricks. That's the Boss's orders, and then we'll all to our little bye-byes. You look all in! Cor, when I first come here I was just the same. But you'll harden. You harden here or you go under; no other alternative. You seem a sensible chap, so keep your head, and remember you've got one advantage over them. You've got your faculties, and they're mostly doped. I'd better show you how to work the wheel first."

"What I'll never learn is the language. All those funny words!"

"Nark it! *Faites vos jeux*—anybody can say that. And all you need to learn is the numbers and the even chances. This is where you control the ball." He displayed and demonstrated the concealed knob by which with his knee he could slow down the ball.

"Oh, there's a trick in it?" Edward said.

"You've got to wangle things a bit sometimes. Doesn't do for the Boss to lose, you know. You'll get clever at it. After a bit you can make it stop pretty well anywhere."

"But isn't that cheating?"

The croupier looked at Edward with a tired grimace. "Are you being funny? What do you think this is—a Sunday school?"

"I don't know," said Edward, "but it's the rummest place I was ever in. Every time you say 'nwah' I get a yellow tiddley-wink."

"You been lucky tonight? Made some money? I told you there was pickings."

"I suppose I did win, but an old girl pinched the lot."

"You'll have to look after yourself better than that. I tell you, this lot's the sweepings of the old aristocracy of Europe, and carrion crows isn't in it with them. Look, we'll just run through the numbers. *Un, deux, trois*—that's one, two, three. Come on, say it!"

"Urn. Durr. I can't think. My head feels like a boiled potato. What's your name?"

"Bert Holmes to you. They call me Fernando here, and won't I be glad to be Bert Holmes again!"

"Bert, I wish you were stopping. I think you and I would have got on together."

"Nothing doing, Cock. I wouldn't stay for a million lira. Come on, *un, deux, trois*."

In that atmosphere, reeling with weariness, Edward could absorb very little. He said, "Can't we go to bed now, and get on with this tomorrow morning?"

"That's an idea. See you tomorrow, then. You get to bed, mate, and sleep till somebody brings you coffee, which may be about ten or eleven, if you're lucky. And remember what I told you. There's only two things to do. Lock your bedroom door, and if necessary bash 'em off; or take their money, and to hell with virtue. Got it?"

Edward's room looked cool and inviting. He had left the door on to the balcony open and outside he could see the solemn dome of the sky. A faint breeze, delicious with flower-scents, stole in.

He locked his door and looked doubtfully at the balcony. From the next room came stifled laughter, followed by a raucous shriek.

He sighed and examined the window-fittings. There was a shutter arrangement that came down and locked into a socket. It worked. It shut out the lovely sky and the refreshing air. The room seemed close and box-like.

Sadly he got into bed. It was a pity, he thought, that bedrooms didn't have separate balconies. He thought nothing of this idea of a balcony that ran all along the house. Not with this lot.

9

Villa Laga di Lucia

May 3rd, 1901

"Dear Rollin,

"I thought you would like to hear from me, as I have now been here a week. This is such a beautiful place that you could not imagine it even in your dreams. There is a picture in the Redburn Gallery that we once saw together; it hasn't any title, but it is in the little room at the top of the stairs, on the long wall to the left, about the third picture; it has a blue lake and a pink sky and looks as if the painter had blown gold dust all over it. Go and have another look at it, and you will be able to imagine this place where I am now. This is a very large white villa and was built for an Indian prince who never lived in it. There are a great many rooms, which is a good thing, as we have a great many guests, and a queer collection too, straight out of a pantomime, only they have a look of the Zoo about them too. Think of parrots, wolves, and big cats dressed up to kill and you won't be far off the mark.

"There are plenty of servants, all Italian, and as I can't understand a word they say, they are not much company. The girls (maids) are a fast lot, and you can have them so far as I'm concerned.

"You will wonder what I do with my time, since I have no meals to serve. I have a new job—I am what they call a croupier. It is easy, and though I can't say I'm mad on it, it doesn't hurt me. I keep a little ball rolling and yell out numbers in French. I often yell out the wrong numbers, but this crowd wouldn't notice if I yelled out Milk-O. They grab each other's winnings and use their claws. You would hardly believe it, but I understand some of them are old aristocracy, though far from West End in their manners and habits. They also smell. It's a good thing I have a sense of humour.

"The Major seems to enjoy himself. I don't know what he does, he always seems cool and secretive as usual, and he has made a few attempts to get me to join in the so-called fun, but in the end he'll have to give it up as a bad job. You know what I am.

"Nobody here gets up till about two, then they crawl out, like when you turn up a stone. I don't have to work in the afternoons; I go out for a walk, and it is really heavenly, Rollin. Such beauty.

And warm! I don't think people in England ever know what it is to be warm all through, without being baked alive. You should see the vines, the olives and the cypresses! The flowers too, tumbling down from the walls as if Nature had so many she wanted to throw them about, and so much scent she just had to use it up on the air. The roads are white and dusty, but I leave the road and walk up into the hills beyond the lake. I sometimes see a few peasants there and wish I could talk to them. You know how I always liked talking to people? They smile at me and look friendly. It's a pity you can't make friends all over the world just because you can't all talk alike, isn't it? I have made friends with a donkey, and I call it mine. It seems to know what I say, though I expect it really talks Italian like everybody else, and all I know is Good morning and Good night. In the day-time my donkey works very hard, with baskets slung across its back, but by about five o'clock it is in its field and comes to hee-haw at me across the wall. It eats anything I take it from the kitchen. rolls, fruit and broken pastries and the jam pancakes they make here with ice inside. It's something to have made one friend!

"Don't worry about me, Rollin. This crowd doesn't interest me at all, and I can bash the women off if necessary——"

Edward stopped writing, and after a moment's consideration scrubbed out the last phrase.

After three nights he had been able to bear no longer the airlessness of his room, and had chanced leaving the balcony door open, only to fight off in the darkness a scaly hag with a nightmare face and poisonous breath who screamed as he pinioned her and bundled her out into the corridor.

In the morning she was still lying there, and she wasn't so old, after all—she was the auburn-haired girl with the huge black eyes whom everybody called Zilla. She was Roumanian, and her father was an oil-millionaire.

These facts came out later, when Kinryce, pale with anger, called Edward on to the carpet and asked him what he meant by insulting his guests.

"She insulted me first," said Edward calmly.

"And who do you think you are? My valet; don't forget it."

"Major-domo, sir," said Edward. "But I didn't realise what was included in the duties."

"I brought you here to be pleasant to my guests"—Edward's eyes widened—"and to have a good time yourself. You don't try. The lady whose wrist you sprained could have done a lot for you."

"She tried to," said Edward dryly, "but it didn't come off."

Kinryce glared at him for a moment, then suddenly burst into laughter.

"You revolting young prig!"

"Yes, sir."

"Yes—what? What are you talking about?"

"Being called names doesn't worry me. I'm sorry I sprained the lady's wrist, but I'm rather strong in the arm when I'm roused. Perhaps some of the other ladies might like to know that."

Kinryce looked baffled. He shrugged his shoulders, aware that Edward, for all his apparent simplicity, had had the last word.

"Well, no more scenes like last night if you want me to keep my temper."

"I'll see there aren't, sir—I'll keep the shutters down. But I could do with some air all the same. It seems a pity that even the air isn't free in a nice place like this."

"Oh, go to hell!"

... Edward could still read the scratched out sentence, so he blackened it until the paper gave way. Then he wrote:

"—I am making the best of everything here and it might be a lot worse. I don't know how long we shall be staying. I hope you are having nice weather in London.

"Your sincere friend,

"Edward."

The villa stood in open country, six miles from a small market town. Provisions for the villa came by train to this town, and Edward won for himself the privilege of going once a week in the open carriage to collect the goods.

This was a treat for him, to bowl along the white roads under the sparkling sun, and to come at last to the little town with time to spare. He would poke about the narrow streets discovering the shops, the queer old buildings, the dim church with its plaster saints and its lilies, or buy fruit to eat as he sat on a bench under the poplars watching the people go by. To gain a nod of the head, a fleeting smile, delighted him. He saw the children at play, and made himself popular with gifts of cakes and sticky sweets. It was a perfect escape from his tawdry prison, making life bearable.

A mile or so from the villa there rose up a sharp ascent, a lane that twisted and climbed to a steep and rocky hill-top, at the very peak of which clung a small village. One could see clearly in the sun the pink-and-cream cottages clustered round the campanile of the church, which was like a gold finger against the sky. This tiny eyrie of a place fascinated Edward. Now who would build a village right up there, when there was all the plain and the lake-shore? Some people must like to live far from civilisation—that could be the only reason. The inhabitants of that village must be very self-contained, needing little from the rest of the world.

The name of this place was Montemezora, or Half-Hour Mountain, and Edward knew that one day he would make time to go there, though if the 'half-hour' referred to the approximate time it would

take to climb the steep ascent, it seemed to err on the side of optimism.

He made himself rise one morning at eight. This was not easy, as he never got to bed before four, sometimes later. The guests at the villa were constantly changing, and they were all avid night-birds. The morning hours were so exquisite that Edward thought almost murderously of the crazy work that necessitated his sleeping through them, and of the gross, rapacious people who had no use for them.

He dressed and went down to a silent house; the cook, who was sitting in the sun at the back door, showed some surprise, but made him coffee and found him rolls and *pasta*, with a scathing remark in her own language, the sense of which happily missed him. He had no contact with the servants, but knew that they associated him with the general depravity of the villa's inhabitants. He wished very much that he could talk their language, for apart from the young maids, whose only object was to make money out of the guests by selling their favours, the rest seemed decent people; but though he had picked up a few functional phrases, he had no means of expressing his thoughts.

It was just after half-past eight when he set off into the bright, cool morning and turned his steps towards the thickets of dwarf oak and juniper through which he must go to reach the mountain.

There was a dusty lane that led all the way, and he met farmers with their market carts and panniered donkeys with flowers stuck in their nose-bands. To all he offered a stammered word of greeting and a smile; some returned these, others stared at him and seemed unfriendly.

The stony ascent began, and beside the track tumbled a stream that splashed and sang. Half-way up the hill this stream made a direct crossing of the track, under a low culvert. He sat down on the wall of the culvert and looked back to a great expanse of country, silvered in the morning haze; the lake like a blue jewel among the grey-green olive terraces, the long lines of poplars bordering the fields.

He heard footsteps behind him and realised that someone had stopped.

"Good morning."

"Good morning," said Edward, pleased to have been addressed in English.

The newcomer was an elderly man dressed like a peasant; a big man with strong features, and black hair tipped with frost and swept back from a brown forehead.

"What are you thinking about?" the man demanded.

"I'm thinking that it's nice to hear somebody speak English."

"Point one. I lived for nine years in England. I taught Italian in London. I came back to Italy to become a professor in the university of Padua, but all I really wanted was to be a schoolmaster in

Montemezora, so that is what I became. Now you ask me a question?"

"Shall I? . . . Why did you want to come to the village on the top of the hill?"

"Point two. Easy. It's my native place. Now it's my turn. It's something new to see an English visitor who gets up early in the morning to explore and dream. I know you were dreaming, because I watched you for quite a time before I reached you. What were you dreaming about?"

"Wherever I look," said Edward, "I see a spinning wheel. Not a *spinning* wheel; a spinning *wheel*. It goes round and round; round and round. It's a bit like life, I think. Round and round, and gets you nowhere. Only this wheel has got stars all round the edge of it—glittering stars that wink at you and say, 'Stick it out—we're here'."

"That's true. Life and time are round, like a wheel. The past and the future are one. Your turn for a question."

"That village. I suppose it's real? It looks as if it might vanish when you get nearer to it."

"Come along and see for yourself."

"With you? That's kind of you."

"Point three. I like young men with ideas, I'm always kind to them."

They began to climb together. Edward said, "You don't know what a treat it is to find somebody I can talk to. I've wanted to talk to the people here and ask them things. It's lonely when you're cut off from making friends because you speak a different language. I can't even make out what the children say in Santavigna, and when I speak to them in English they laugh at me, as if I was grunting like an animal."

The man laughed, and said, "Now we're getting nearer to the top of the mountain I suppose you'll want to ask another question—why some of us choose to live up there. Ours is an old village. It was built high up for protection during the wars of the Middle Ages. Those of us who stay there do so because we love it and couldn't live anywhere else. Those who want to leave go away when they're still young. In winter we're cold up there, but our walls are thick, in summer we have the finest views in the province. Look! You can see our houses now—and there's our piazza, and there's the church."

"What a tall campanile! From below it looks like a gold finger."

"Let's go in."

"Will the priest mind?"

"He's probably asleep under his vines at this minute. And anyway, he's a friend of mine."

The interior of the church was bare and cool, the walls pale blue. It had its dim saints; its gold-hung altar; its lighted candles, heaped flowers, and heavy scent of age. It was spotlessly clean

"Shall I hear the bells?" Edward asked.

"Would you like to? Sometimes when the wind is right they can be heard down in the plain. I'd ring one for you now, but it would only fetch out the whole village to see if there was a fire or a fight, so you'll have to wait till noon."

"But it's barely ten o'clock."

"What of it? You can come to my house and have something to eat and drink."

"But that would be taking your time."

"What's time? I know of no such thing."

"But you're a schoolmaster."

"And I have thirty-two children to teach, and when they are helping their fathers with the vines they don't bother to come to school at all. Come along."

The schoolmaster's house, like all the others in the village, was low-built and had walls a foot thick, washed white and painted with garlands of flowers. They went through the open doorway into a comfortably furnished room with three walls lined with books. Against the fourth stood a prie-dieu, and above it a crucifix. The deep windows were open and wistaria hung down in a blue shower.

"Maria!" the schoolmaster called. "We've a visitor."

She came out of the kitchen, a stout, black-clad woman with mild round eyes. He gave her orders in her own language.

"There," he said. "I'm a bit frightened of her, you know. By the way, my name's Anselmo. Do you care for books? You'll find all the English classics here, as well as the works of Mark Twain and Jerome K. Jerome."

Across the open doorway walked a small boy driving three white goats. He stopped and looked in curiously, then shied and ran away.

"Let's step out into the garden."

Far away, and far below, the whole world seemed to lie shimmering like a misty picture.

"What a wonderful place!"

"Wonderful. Quite. So near heaven, you'd think. But there are no angels here, only human beings with plenty of faults. That boy you saw just now is a nice little fellow and sings in the choir like a bird, but he tells lies and I can't break him of it. Too much imagination, I convince myself—but then his father tells lies too, and he has no imagination at all. Ah, here comes our coffee and our wine; cheese and cakes."

They ate in the garden, and birds fluttered down to find the crumbs, so tame that they hopped on the table.

"So you're a visitor to Italy?" Don Anselmo said. "All alone?"

"No. I mean, I'm not quite a visitor. I'm in a gentleman's service. Down at the villa by the lake"

As soon as he said it his spirits sank, for he saw the startled look on his host's face.

"Not that villa——"

I've done it now! thought Edward miserably.

"That's the place," he said.

The schoolmaster's eyes narrowed. "We don't like that villa, we in Montemezora. Nor do those in Santavigna like it, nor the farmers in the plain."

Edward broke out, "I don't like it myself. It's not my kind of place at all."

"What do you do there?"

"I'm just the Major's valet. And I'm the croupier too; I spin the wheel, though that isn't my line either. I came along with the Major."

"The croupier? That was the beginning of your philosophising about life. Your wheel—and what about the stars?"

"It's a good job I've got the stars. You can stick a lot in a lovely spot like this."

"Even the villa—the local plague-spot?"

"You can't tell me anything about it I don't know," Edward said. "People stare at me, knowing where I come from. I suppose they think I'm like the rest."

The older man regarded him thoughtfully.

"I wouldn't think so. Just one look at you—no, I wouldn't think so. But what got you into a place like that?"

"I told you. I came with the Major. I wanted to see for myself what it was like."

"That was rash. You might have——"

"Oh no. Nothing like that. Their way of living seems insane to me. So many people with the instincts of wild beasts."

"But haven't we all? I mean, what distinguishes the man from the wild beast is not instinct, but behaviour."

"You think that's in man's favour?" Edward studied the ground at his feet. "I would have thought so once. Now I think that when it comes to behaviour, man will go a lot further than any wild beast."

"You'd call that deliberate insanity."

"That's just right. You're an Italian, but you speak my language better than I do. You use educated phrases. That is what I want to learn," he added, on a note of longing.

"You do? But you learn by reading. Take your English classics, see how your great literary men turn a phrase. Would this make sense to you in your present life?"

"Very much so. A book, down by the lake—that would be real; it would make my other life, the work I have to do, like a dream that's easy to forget."

The other man jumped up.

"Take my books! Any of my books! If you feel like that, you have more right to them than I have."

"Oh, that is good of you!"

The schoolmaster smiled. "What's your name? I didn't ask you that."

"Edward."

"Are you a Londoner?"

"No, I come from the country. From Shropshire, on the border of Wales. Quiet, cool country—very slow. My father's a gardener. He wanted me to be one too, and now I think I might have been happier if I had. But I begin to wonder if anybody knows what he really wants until it's too late."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

"And what in all the glory of the world are you too late for, at twenty-two? You're rather a remarkable young man."

"No, no. If I were—what you say—it would be easier down there."

"I can't understand why you don't leave!"

"Oh, I couldn't leave the Major. He'd never get along without me. He may not think so, but I know. I have to stand by the Major. But that lot down there—well, they're something you can't describe. The old croupier—the one who left when I came—told me I'd only need two things: a sense of humour and a strong left hook to the jaw. I've used both. 'When they come at you,' he said, 'bash them. You've got your faculties and they're doped.' It works."

"To the strong left hook I'd add your own great strength of character."

"I don't know about that. Oh, I think you must be wrong about that. I just seem to do what is commonsense—and decent. And the country is so pretty; a breath of that makes up for a lot of hot rooms and queer people."

"You really are quite amazing. You're human and no saint. You live in a sewer, and the slime never touches you. I live on this free, fine mountain and I'd be afraid to match myself with your circumstances."

"I wish I hadn't said so much. I——"

"But why not? I only wish I could help you. Is there any other way in which I can help you than by offering books to read by the lake?"

"But you've shown me this wonderful place! And talked to me! What more could I want?" Edward's voice and eyes showed his satisfaction.

"And how long have you got to put up with this state of affairs?"

"Staying at the villa, you mean? I suppose we'll be going back home when the Major gets bored, and the sooner the better for me. Though I would like to have seen more of Italy. I may never have the chance again."

"By the Major you mean the man who runs that hell-hole? Have you any kind of obligation towards him?"

"Not really—but—we know where we stand with one another now, the Major and I."

"I had no idea when I spoke to you——"

"That was a good thing. Perhaps if you'd known where I came from you wouldn't have wanted to show me your house, and I should have lost a lot. But you spoke, and a friend was just what I needed. I've felt lonely; that's why I was sorry I couldn't talk to people—ordinary people—and make friends. Having one friend—besides my donkey—would have been splendid."

"A donkey! More and more you surprise me; more and more I like you. Will you count me as your friend?"

"Do you mean that?"

"I mean that you can come up here whenever you like. You can sit in my garden, talk or be silent, drink my wine. Or I'll meet you down in the plain; I'll take you round and show you some of the country. How often are you free?"

"Every morning—while the crowd are sleeping it off."

"If you ever want to leave, I might be able to help you."

"I shan't leave. It would be like running away; and why should I do that? I'll see it out." Edward got up and held out his hand "I don't know how to thank you, Mr Anselmo!"

"That's settled, then. Come along, and hear the bells "

IO

"*Faites vos jeux*," said Edward smoothly. "*Rien ne va plus . . .*" The wheel spun; the ball did its little *pas seul*, and slowly came to a stop. "*Le six*," said Edward "*Rouge. Pair*."

Kinryce looked at him approvingly. What a competent young man he was; handsome, confident, assured! Just a little too confident and assured. And would nothing overcome that maddening detachment of his? Heaven knew everything had been tried.

Guests at the villa had changed. A new lot, very much like the old lot, were eyeing each other's jewels, and clutching at the green baize.

The women ogled Edward with slow, luscious glances. He stared them out with maddening insolence.

Every night his door was locked, his balcony shutter drawn down. But the hot and airless bedroom was no longer a trial to him, for he had found his means of escape, and every night when the house was still he slipped out and, crossing two fields, made his way to a lonely straw-stack, where he could lie under the stars, a rug drawn up to his chin. The straw was prickly, but his sleep was sweet.

It was a long time before Kinryce discovered that Edward was not sleeping in the villa.

"I called you last night," he said. "I wanted you. I banged on your door and you didn't reply. Were you dead drunk?"

"I wasn't there," said Edward.

"You——" Nonplussed, Kinryce thought for a moment and then smiled. "Oh, I see."

"No, you don't, sir," said Edward.

"What are you talking about? Where were you, then?"

"In bed. But not in this house."

"Don't talk to me in riddles. Where were you?"

"That's what I don't choose to tell, sir. I do my work, you've nothing to complain of. And if I want to sleep outside this monkey-house, it's my business. I have a right to fresh air."

Kinryce went pale with anger.

"You certainly do nothing to make yourself agreeable to my guests."

"I never had any intention of being agreeable to your guests. That isn't what I came here for. I don't like your guests," said Edward, warming up. "And there are times when I don't like you. I've sometimes thought that loyalty can be carried too far."

Kinryce's manner became more agreeable, almost ingratiating.

"Edward, don't be hasty. You know I can't do without you. But you'll get back to your room and stay there. I mean it!"

"Thank you, sir. This is the end. I'm leaving at once."

"Leaving! And where do you think you're going?"

"Italy's a big country."

"And what do you use for money? And how do you think you'll get back to England?"

"That doesn't worry me. I'll find a way. I'll walk to Genoa and get on a boat as a deck-scrubber."

Kinryce looked at him thoughtfully. "I didn't think you could be so aggressive."

"A mouse could be aggressive in this place, if it felt like I do."

"I'll double your wages if you'll stay."

"You can keep the wages. I'm leaving."

Kinryce took a noisy breath.

"All right," he said. "You win. And you're the first man who's ever made me say that. I grudge the respect I've got for you, but it's there." He took out his purse and laid a few sovereigns on the table. "There's your fare back to London. Take it."

Edward stared at the gold coins. He never thought it possible that he could win this battle. He didn't know what to do with his victory. He looked at Kinryce, and the old inexplicable liking came flowing back.

His hand swept the money aside.

"Keep it. I'll stay."

Kinryce's morose look changed quickly to delight.

"Edward, you're admirable. I——"

"I'm making my own terms. I go on being your croupier, and my private life is my own. You order your guests to leave me alone. I want neither their tips nor their remarks nor their attentions."

You'll see to that. And I shall continue to sleep where I choose, because I don't like the smell of this house. If anyone interferes with me I shall deal with him—or her—in my own way. If I think of anything else I'll let you know."

"You don't spare yourself or me, do you?" said Kinryce, not without a touch of malicious humour.

"If you can't control your own show, then the deal is off and I leave. When are we going back to London?"

"I hadn't thought of it. But the weather will soon be getting too hot to be comfortable."

"It can't be too soon for me," said Edward. He smiled imperturbably. "Will that be all, sir? Thank you, sir."

II

Villa Laga di Lucia
July 16, 1901

"Dear Rollin,

"Thank you very much for your letter. I did enjoy it and have read it over and over again. I was interested to hear that you saw the new king and queen. So now I am called after the King of England? Edward the Seventh. That makes me in the fashion.

"You'll be glad to hear that we shall soon be back in London. It is getting very hot here, with a shimmering heat that slides over the country and drains away all the colour. Everything but the vines and the olives looks tired. The one thing the Major can't stand is the heat. He says he feels like a rag, and since his guests looked like rags to begin with they are now practically in shreds and are off to cooler spots for the summer.

"We are returning next week. I think Italy is a most beautiful, romantic country, but this particular spot is not one of the best. I don't mind the heat. I'm so brown I look like a darkie, that is because I go out in the sun when everybody else is sleeping.

"You should see the lizards! They are the prettiest things, like strips of emerald, and so quick! I caught several, but their tails came off which spoilt their looks, but now I have a little one which I keep in a box in my room. It is good company and so knowing. Before I go away it will be taken back to the sun and the flowers.

"I shall be very sorry to leave a friend of mine who lives in a village near here, on the top of a mountain. He has been a wonderful friend to me, has lent me books and shown me old buildings where you can sit in peace and listen to the notes of the bells falling like drops of water. One thing in life is that you always seem to find a friend when you need one. I often think as I climb the mountain track to his house how you would love to be with me and look back on the shining plain that stretches for miles and see the lake gleaming under the blue sky. And in his garden we would eat almond cakes,

drink wine, and read Huckleberry Finn! Not very Italian, this last, you would say. But soon we shall be in London together again.

"I hope that you are well and that Mrs Kinryce is well. I haven't heard anything of her.

"Your sincere friend,
"Edward."

The journey back was uneventful. Kinryce was deflated, silent, and often morose. Edward realised that he was unpopular. His pockets were empty, though there had been money at the villa for the picking up. He had not wanted it.

When they got to the house at Haverstock Hill and the cab set them down at the door, Edward jumped out and began to carry in the luggage.

Mrs Kinryce was standing in the hall. She looked at him searchingly.

"Good evening, madam."

"Oh. Good evening, Edward. So you're back?"

Kinryce came up the steps, and muttered, "Well, Gwen?"

She did not speak. He pushed past her and went upstairs.

Edward carried up the bags, tidied himself hastily in his room, put on his service coat, and went down to the kitchen.

"Well!" said the cook. "Back from your little jaunt? I bet you've seen life. But perhaps you'd better not tell a couple of innocent young girls—eh, Grace?"

"My, you are brown!" said Grace. "You look like an Eyetalian."

"I've had plenty of sun. What about dinner?"

"I've laid the table for you," said Grace. "Have you seen the missus?"

"I spoke to her in the hall."

"Well, now she's got her load of trouble back I can't see much future for her, poor soul. Just when she was perking up a bit too. She soon stopped that fool of a doctor coming after you'd gone. Him and his filthy medicine! All she wants is peace of mind—but I suppose it's none of my business."

"If I was her," said Cook, "I'd have buzzed off before *he* came back. But she's the faithful sort. Afraid of what might come out in the papers if there was a divorce; that's at the bottom of it."

"It'll come out one of these days, in any case," said Grace avidly. "They're talking about cleaning up the West End."

"Shut up!" said Edward. "And tell me what time I'm going to serve the dinner."

"Hark at him! Prince Edward! His high and mightiness! Half-past seven, if we're lucky."

Edward met Rollin Burkley about a week later. The young man greeted him eagerly, with outstretched hand, and said, "You can't think how glad I am to see you back. I had my doubts about that

place you were going to, but it can't have been so bad as I feared. And yet you seem to have been away for ages."

"It feels like a year!"

"And you look thinner—and older, Edward. Now I suggest we walk right across the Park as far as Kensington and back, watch the people, and talk our heads off; and I've found a new cookshop in Oxford Street where the food and the prices are both nearly too good to be true."

To Edward the London scene was refreshing after the breathless heat of the Italian summer. From the parched plain he had come back to diffused sunlight, bland and cool, to green grass and bowery trees in the parks, to the sight of tall grey houses and dignified buildings, carriages bowling along tidy gravel-ways, to friendly, honest Cockneys in the streets and the sound of English speech.

Rollin said, "Forgive me for asking you, but how did you find my sister when you came back?"

"She seemed fairly well. She didn't say very much."

"She was glad to see you safely back, I do know that. She has a great regard for you, Edward."

"Has she?" said Edward, doubtful and surprised.

Rollin's face was clouded and he dug his hands deep into his pockets as he walked.

"She's so depressed and low," he said, "that I'm worried to death. I feel that she's reached a state of mind in which anything could happen. She might even try—to do away with herself."

"Oh no. She wouldn't do that?"

"I shouldn't have mentioned my fears. Apart from anything else, it's quite inexcusable to force one's grim forebodings upon a friend's ears. I hope I'm wrong. Please forget what I said, only if ever there should be anything that you could do for her——"

Edward was silent, for he had unpleasant memories of a conversation he had been compelled to listen to.

It was the evening after their return from Italy, and at dinner Kinryce had broken out, quite regardless of Edward's presence in the room, "Haven't you got anything to say, Gwen? Ever since I came back you've treated me to an exhibition of dumbness. It's like sitting at table with a mute. You make no effort."

"What do you want me to say?"

"Say anything! Why on earth can't you be like other women—show a little sparkle? You used to be intelligent. I don't know what's happened to you lately."

"Whatever I am, you have made me so."

"That's utter nonsense. Don't blame me for your brooding ways. I'm easy-going, pleasant. I get along with anybody. I've never said a harsh word to you, have I? Never provoked you?"

"Haven't you?" Mrs Kinryce shivered and drew her scarf close round her shoulders. She pushed her untouched plate away.

"Now don't pretend you don't want your dinner! This is too much."

"I don't want it."

Glad of an excuse to escape, Edward had picked up the plate and carried it out to the pantry, but even there through the ventilator Kinryce's raised voice pursued him.

"What the hell's the matter with you, Gwen? You don't know what it is to want for anything. You've got a fine house, servants to wait on you. What more do you want? Can't you even try to behave normally? I'd buy you good clothes if you'd wear them; I hate those drab clothes you wear. You can entertain your friends——"

"You only mock at and ridicule my friends. My kind of people."

"Oh heavens! Can't you stand a bit of teasing?"

"Not teasing like yours. That is cruelty, aimed against the things I care for. Against my heart and soul."

"Now you're just hysterical. What you need is a bit of gaiety. Why not let me invite people in, people who are vivacious, who'll amuse you? I guarantee you'd be a different person if you'd let me find you some friends."

"Friends? Your kind of friends? I'd rather die."

Kinryce made an explosive exclamation.

"Then die, for God's sake! Let's have it one way or the other."

... It was the memory of this conversation that kept Edward silent when Rollin questioned him. It was something that Rollin must not know. It had troubled him, and he had lain awake at night turning it over in his mind.

Nor was he going to tell how the following afternoon he had carried Mrs Kinryce's tea to the drawing-room and had found her seated by the empty grate, a shawl huddled round her shoulders, though the July day was sultry.

"Oh madam, are you cold? Shall I light a fire for you?"

"A fire in July!"

For the first time that he could remember she had given him a wan smile, and he realised that once she must have been a pretty and attractive woman.

The smile vanished as she shivered again.

"I think perhaps you've taken cold."

"Oh no."

"The hot tea will do you good."

"Thank you," she said lifelessly. "You can put it down here."

He had an anxious feeling lest the moment he was gone she might push the tea aside and ignore it. He was determined to stay. He said, "There's no reason why you shouldn't have a fire, madam, even if it is July. My mother was always a great one for a fire if she felt the least bit chilly. She said it put spirit into her."

"You're very kind, Edward—but please don't bother about the

fire. I don't feel cold now. I haven't said how glad I am to see you looking so well—though you're thinner. Was that due to the heat in Italy?"

"I think it must have been."

"Did you—enjoy yourself there?"

"Everything was perfectly satisfactory, madam."

"I'm glad to hear that. I—thought about you."

"That was kind of you. Shall I pour your tea?"

"Do you know how I like it?"

Edward smiled. "I should, by now. Very little milk—there, is that right?"

"I don't really think I want any."

"Oh, but everybody wants a cup of tea! If you're not feeling well it works wonders."

"It's good of you—to look after me."

"Not at all, madam. I'm sorry if you're not feeling well. And it really does feel a little chilly in here. Won't you let me draw back the curtains and open the windows to let some warm air in? It's a lovely day."

She stiffened. "No, thank you. I'm quite all right as I am."

... Could he tell Rollin this? No, for too much lay behind it. Already he was worried enough about his sister.

"Let's go and have tea," Rollin said, "and afterwards there's a choice of things we can do. We can go back to my rooms and read *Idle Thoughts of An Idle Fellow*, or we can go to a music-hall, or see a new play."

"Which would you rather do?"

"It's for you to choose, Edward. I'm determined not to thrust any more of my worries on you. Talking is so profitless when you know there's no solution in it."

"Talk if you'd rather," Edward said reluctantly.

"No. We'll look for some enjoyment. You've been away from London long enough."

Autumn came, and then the winter. Kinryce was away from home a great deal, and though to some degree his absence lessened the feeling of tension, the house was gloomy and the life monotonous for Edward.

Since they had come back from Italy, Kinryce's attitude to him had changed. He no longer made any attempts to be friendly or genial, but would order Edward about unnecessarily, and do aggravating things to make his work harder, deliberately rumpling a suit or coat which Edward had carefully pressed, with a curt, "Take this rag away and make it presentable. What do you think I pay you for?"

He's given me up, Edward thought, but he shan't say that I've given him up.

After Christmas, Grace the housemaid left. She said she couldn't

stand the place any longer, but must get a situation where there was more life.

"More life," she repeated. "This place is like a tomb."

"More work, that's what you'll get," the cook retorted.

"I wouldn't care. Better than going mouldy here."

Mrs Kinryce did nothing about engaging a new maid. The idea did not seem to occur to her, or else she was too indifferent to take the trouble. A woman friend of the cook came in each morning, ostensibly to clean, but she seemed to do no more than sit by the kitchen fire, drinking tea and gossiping. Edward quietly and without fuss took on the greater part of Grace's work, though by doing so his freedom was very much curtailed and he had to give up the evening classes which were such a pleasure to him. So far as Mrs Kinryce was concerned, the extra work he did seemed to go unnoticed.

Unfortunately, too, he was cut off from meeting Rollin Burkley, and felt diffident about giving Rollin a reason. Sometimes several weeks would elapse without their meeting, and therefore they began to drift apart; the thread of their friendship was broken; and Rollin, puzzled, went his own way, not realising how much Edward felt the loss.

By now there was no doubt that Mrs Kinryce was really ill. Edward, who knew that her spirit was broken, began to wonder if her heart was actually broken too, for he had found her white and shaken, her lips blue, her hand pressed to her side.

"Mrs Kinryce! What can I get for you? Tell me what to do."

Pride struggled against her weakness.

"Nothing. Nothing at all. I shall be all right." But in a moment she was near collapse.

"Let me fetch the doctor."

"No! Not the doctor. I don't like him."

"I'll find another doctor. There's one round the corner."

He rushed out into the street and was fortunate to find a doctor at home. They came back together. Between them they managed to lift Mrs Kinryce and carry her to her bed. An ampoule was broken and held for her to breathe. Presently she sat up and gasped, "I'm all right now. Please leave me. There's nothing the matter with me but a slight chill."

"Does she often have attacks like this one?" the doctor asked, as he went downstairs.

"I've never seen her in one before."

"She seems to be in a very delicate and overwrought state, and her heart is bad. She should take great care. I'm going to send her round some medicine. Who is her doctor?"

"She—hasn't one."

"Are you in charge here? By the way, who am I speaking to?"

"I'm Major Kinryce's servant. She is Mrs Kinryce."

"Major Kinryce! Good heavens! is she *his* wife? Poor soul! Is she alone here, except for you?"

"Major Kinryce is away," said Edward, embarrassed. "I'll do everything for her that you tell me."

"Good. You seem a sensible young man. But—Kinryce! Ah well, call round for the medicine, will you? In about an hour."

When he went upstairs again Mrs Kinryce said, "Well, that is over. There's no need for the doctor to come again."

"He says that you're not at all well, madam. He's told me to fetch you some medicine. Do please take care of yourself, won't you?"

She looked at him with displeasure.

"That is my affair, Edward. You may go now And please don't discuss my sudden illness in the kitchen."

He wanted to exclaim hotly, "As if I would do so! You ought to know me better by now." But he went out silently and closed the door.

He called for the medicine. Mrs Kinryce received it without comment, but Edward saw no more of it and never knew whether she was taking it.

January dragged by, and on the first of February Kinryce came home. Edward saw the cab draw up as he stood at an upstairs window, and was surprised because there had been no warning of this arrival.

He went down to the hall. Kinryce did not even greet him, but said curtly, "Take my bags up."

"Yes, sir. Shall I unpack for you?"

"Of course!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't know whether you were staying."

"Staying? Why shouldn't I be staying? It's my house, isn't it?"

This irritable attitude persisted for a couple of days, during which Kinryce seemed nervy and worried, nor did he ever leave the house Mrs Kinryce kept to her room; so far as Edward could tell, her husband had not even visited her or inquired about her. Later Kinryce became more affable towards Edward, who got the impression that he was being placated and brought back into favour.

"Do you know what's up with his lordship?" the cook asked one day as she dished up the lunch.

Edward said nothing.

"Oh, don't be so high and mighty. I've got my eyes and ears And, what's more, I read the papers *and* I'm quick in the uptake and can put two and two together."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course you do. So does everybody else. It says in the paper that the Government's going to clean up the racket of him and his sort, and if he don't skip it quick I should say he'll get ten years. I'll tell you what: I'm not going to be here when the crash comes, not me. It'd do me no good, nor you either—if you've got sense.

I'm giving in my notice today; and, what's more, I'm sacrificing my week's money and leaving tomorrow. I'm an honest girl, I am. I don't want my name in the papers along with him—not me."

Edward seized the tray and went upstairs.

Next morning, with a good deal of noise, the cook left. Nor did the daily woman arrive, but at ten o'clock a child came round to say that his mother had got another place and was not coming any more.

Edward went on quietly with the work of the house. When he carried coals up to the drawing-room to lay and light the fire he found Mrs Kinryce sitting there in the raw February morning, her arms lying along those of the chair, her head laid back as though it was too heavy to raise. In her great dark eye-sockets the weary, sunken eyes seemed to have no gleam at all.

"I've come to light the fire, madam."

"It doesn't matter."

"But it's a dreadfully cold morning——"

"It doesn't matter."

He knew she had taken no breakfast. She looked almost like a dying woman, and yet every line of her body was taut to the point of trembling.

He left her there, and went to Kinryce's room to make the bed. He thought the room would be empty, but Kinryce was sitting on the edge of the bed shuffling over a pack of papers.

He looked up guardedly when Edward came in.

"It's you. So that fool of a cook has gone?"

"Yes."

"The rat. And are you going too?"

"I'm not going."

Kinryce's manner changed. There was a gleam of wary triumph in his eyes and a certain liveliness in his voice.

"I might have known I could bet my boots on you. Nothing's lost, Edward; we're not down, not by a long way. I suppose you've heard I'm in a—temporary difficulty?"

"Something like that."

"And without discussing details you're prepared to stick by the old ship? It's better than I hoped!"

"I came to do your room," Edward said.

"Leave it. No point in doing it. I want to find out where we stand. You've got a sneaking regard for me, haven't you?"

"I suppose I have. In spite of everything."

"Ah. That. H'm——" Kinryce looked at him intently. "The thing that matters to me is, that in a mess like I'm in you'll stick by me. Edward, I don't deserve you, I never did deserve you. You're the best thing that ever happened to me, and I'm going to reward you handsomely. I'll make your fortune for you. *If you'll go where I go.*"

"You mean, go away?"

"Just that. Frankly, I'm in a hell of a mess, but once out of this country everything will be fine for me. Why not? You and I are sick of London in this foul winter weather. What I propose is that we go off again for a regular holiday. Egypt this time. How's that strike you?"

"I—don't know."

"Come on. Don't chuck me over when I need you!"

"That's the last thing I want to do, but——"

"Look. You're thinking of the last time. Well, it won't be like that; I swear it won't. I give you my word of honour. You'll do what you want, I'll do what I want, all square and level. Once we're abroad this affair will blow over; they can't touch me. Stick by me, and you'll never regret it."

"You sound as if you meant it."

"I do mean it. Man to man I mean it. And I can't get on without you. Don't let me down! Give me a chance. I swear I'll see you right."

"When you put it like that——"

"Our luck's in, Edward. I was always lucky. We can be off tomorrow—today even. Why not?"

"But what about Mrs Kinryce? She isn't well. This is going to be a shock for her."

"She'll be all right. She'll be better off away from this house, with friends. She'll have plenty of money—I'll see to that—and her brother will look after her. It's a credit to you that you're concerned about her, Edward, but I assure you it won't distress her in the least—under present circumstances—to be rid of me. To leave her is the kindest thing I can do, to save her from being mixed up in any—well——"

"If you need me," Edward said, "I'll come with you." The words hardly seemed to have come from him at all. He felt odd and bewildered, quite unable to think clearly. He was committing himself, and wondered desperately if it was for good or bad, but could not withdraw.

"Good man!" Kinryce had jumped up, full of energy and purpose. "Get out the bags, and pack. Pack anything—everything I'll go out and see to the tickets and reservations."

Edward went down to fetch up the cases from the basement. Things had moved too fast for him to follow. Egypt! Going to Egypt!

As he came upstairs again he heard both the Kinryces in the dining-room. They were speaking so loudly, so violently, that he could not avoid hearing every word.

"I say you are not going to take Edward to Egypt!" He had never before heard that shrill tone of defiance from Mrs Kinryce. He would not have thought her capable of it in her crushed, apathetic state.

"Don't be silly, Gwen. This is nothing to do with you."

"It has everything to do with me."

"Gwen, you know perfectly well why I have to go. You know that for your own sake it's the best thing that ever happened to you, to be getting rid of me. Edward and I are getting out of here as soon as I can arrange the details of the journey. Then you can send for your brother, and he——"

"You are not taking Edward to Egypt."

"You underrate me. I am."

"I say you shall not!" Her tone was that of a desperate rather than a merely hysterical woman.

"Look, Gwen. Don't talk about Edward as if he was a bundle of old newspapers. He is going with me of his own accord, by his own choice. Have you got that into your head? I invited him to go, and he consented."

"You mean you wheedled him into saying he'd go, with a lot of lies! I know you so well. You haven't got a shred of decency or faithfulness in you. If Edward goes to Egypt, you'll never be happy until you've ruined and destroyed him."

"What fantastic rubbish! I can't stand here talking—get out of my way."

"You shan't take Edward. I say so!"

"You say so? Gwen, you overrate yourself. You have no say whatever. We'll have no hysterics over this. I know what's the matter with you. You've let yourself get into a low state and your mind's affected. You ought to be in a nursing home. Then, when you recover, you'll see what a fool you made of yourself, and how reasonable I was."

She said, almost as though she had actually lost control of herself, "I've told you. You are not taking Edward with you."

"Pah!"

Kinryce came out of the dining-room and saw Edward carrying the bags two at a time up the stairs.

"I've just thought of it," he said. "We have a lot of wine in the cellar. I don't care for it to be left in an empty house. Will you run round to Shawbridge's and ask them to send for it—at once? To store it."

"You mean, go now?"

"Yes. It's only ten minutes' walk each way. And they must send for it today. Tomorrow we'll be gone."

Edward fetched his hat and coat and went out by the area door.

It was a bitter February day, and by now sleet was falling, driven in his face by a harsh east wind.

He wished he could have let Rollin Burkley know about his departure and all the events that had led up to it, difficult as it would have been to explain. If he could only have met Rollin before he went away! That was impossible, and he had seen so

little of Rollin lately, owing to his duties, that they had become out of touch with one another. If he could have seen Rollin they might have gathered up their friendship again, though it would be quite impossible to make Rollin understand how he felt about Kinryce, or how it seemed to him that he must give the man one more chance.

Perhaps he would have time to write a note, and ask Mrs Kinryce to deliver it to her brother? How much could he explain in a note? Not much perhaps, but it would show friendliness.

He began to compose the note as he walked, head down against the sleet, his hands icy as they gripped the fronts of his coat to hold them across his legs.

... "Dear Rollin,

"I expect you will be surprised to hear that I am going away with Kinryce, after all that has happened, but the fact is that he really needs me, and I can't let him down. I believe he is sincere this time, and if I stick by him it may help. I know what a mess he is in and what it must all look like to you, but I am doing what I believe to be the fair thing. Don't ever worry about me; I shall be all right. I am sorry to be leaving Mrs Kinryce, as she has been kind to me lately, but I know you will be able to look after her from now on, and it may mean a new life and new health for her. The doctor gave her medicine to take for her heart attacks, and I think she has hidden it somewhere. Try and make her take it, as he seemed a very good doctor. Please make an effort to understand this letter, Rollin. I haven't seen much of you lately, and I've been very sorry about it, but it was for reasons that I couldn't give. I missed you so much. Someday we'll meet again in London, but meanwhile I must go away. I could never forgive myself if I let Kinryce down when he is sincere and really needs me. . . ."

These phrases came into his mind as he plodded on towards the wine-merchants. Inadequate as they were, he must find time to get them on paper.

His errand took about half an hour altogether, and he found himself back at the house. He let himself in with his latchkey.

Mrs Kinryce was in the hall. The whole house felt cold and gloomy. Edward shivered, reluctant to take off his overcoat.

"I want you to come into the study for a minute."

"Yes, madam?"

He followed her into the little room, dreading to become involved in any discussion, for she looked so white and tense that he was afraid she might talk wildly and make a scene.

There was no sign of Kinryce.

When Mrs Kinryce spoke it was with reasonably calm tones.

"Edward, I just want to tell you now, you will *not* be going to Egypt."

So she was going through it all again! This would be difficult.

He took a long breath and tried to talk calmly but decisively.

"I'm sorry, madam. I believe you're upset about my going, but I can't help that. The Major wants me to go, and I've promised."

The faint smile she gave was more like a grimace.

"I don't know what he said to extract that promise from you, but I know that he must have deceived you into thinking him sincere."

"I have to give him the benefit of the doubt, Mrs Kinryce. Don't you see that? I couldn't be on good terms with myself otherwise."

She nodded.

"Yes, I thought it would be something like that. The worst thing in the world to you, Edward, is to appear under-generous or less than fair. But that's beside the point. There's no use discussing what should or should not be, because it's done with. You're not going to Egypt. I am dismissing you from our service. You will leave at once."

He thought pityingly that she might be going mad.

"Excuse me, madam, but you can't dismiss me. I only take notice from Major Kinryce."

"That is not so. I am the mistress of the house, I pay your wages, and I am giving you notice. You shall have two weeks' wages—here they are"—she pointed to a little pile of sovereigns which she must previously have laid on the table—"and I have added enough money to pay the railway fare to your home. You must leave at once. Good-bye, Edward. You have been a very good servant to me, and I appreciate it. Now only one thing remains to be done. I shall write you a reference."

He thought with horror, she really has gone out of her mind! I mustn't say anything to excite her. I must pretend to humour her.

Mrs Kinryce crossed to the desk and opened it; methodically she took out a headed sheet of letter-paper and wrote the date upon it.

"What is your other name, Edward?"

"Boan, madam. B-o-a-n."

"Edward Boan." She wrote a few lines, and stopped. "I don't know how to describe you. What exactly is your position in this house?"

"I don't think it has ever been defined. But please—you mustn't—it's no use——"

"I think we'd better call you butler-valet. That will cover any situation you may wish to take in the future." She wrote firmly and rapidly for a few moments, then looked over what she had written and rose to her feet.

"How is this? . . . 'Edward Boan has been in my service as butler-valet for two years. I have found him admirable in every respect and confidently recommend him for any similar position. Signed, G. M. Kinryce'."

"Thank you. It's good of you. But it isn't any use to me. Mrs Kinryce! Don't you understand? I'm not leaving your service."

You're not really dismissing me. I'm going to Egypt with the Major."

She steadied her hand on the back of her chair. Her cold eyes in her haggard face fixed him fearfully.

"You are not going to Egypt with my husband, because my husband is dead."

A choking cry broke from his throat.

"I shot him just now with his old service-pistol. I made quite sure. If you don't believe me, go to the dining-room and see."

For a moment Edward could not breathe or move. Then his breath burst out in a great gasp and he rushed across the hall and opened the dining-room door.

She had spoken the truth. There was no doubt about it. The thing that lay there proved it.

He came out and pulled the dining-room door shut behind him. He leaned against it. She was standing near him, waiting.

"Now!" she said. "You pack your things. You leave at once. It's all over."

"Leave? How can I? I can't leave you here alone."

She put her hands up to her throat.

"You're quite right," she said. "Not alone. You must go and fetch me a policeman."

Chapter 4

I

"HAVEN'T I seen you here before?" asked Mrs Baxby.

"I was here about six years ago. You sent me to Innsbury Royal."

"So I did! I remember you now. But you were just a boy then, and now you look a man. Well, well, well! Let me see, what name was it?"

"Edward, ma'am. Edward Boan. But I thought of changing it."

"Something more dignified? I don't blame you, if you're ambitious, and so you ought to be, with your looks."

Edward had a sudden memory of Mr Sheffield. "I thought of calling myself Edward Shrewsbury."

"Shrewsbury? Very nice." Mrs Baxby was in a relaxed and happy mood today. She smiled, fingered her cornelian beads, and said, "Now let me see, where were you last?"

"In London."

"Have you got your latest reference?"

Edward handed it over. Mrs Baxby read it carefully and with obvious approval, but when she came to the signature her eyes became like saucers.

"Kinryce! That couldn't be—oh no! Not that case in the papers?"

Edward nodded silently.

"Those Kinryces! Why, I said when I read about it, that must be the Major Kinryce who was a connection of Lady Meade at Innsbury Royal, one of those who got her money. And to think you—— But of course! You would be the butler who gave evidence at the trial. Everybody thought you came out of that very well. I'm sure nobody could hold it against you. You must have had a bad time at that place." She looked at Edward shrewdly, but he did not speak. He coloured, but had no intention of satisfying her desire for sensationalism.

"The woman," she went on, "—she must have been out of her mind, poor soul! But of course the man was a thorough beast; quite *unspeakable*, they say, some of the things that were never disclosed."

"Mrs Kinryce was not insane."

"Well, you certainly spoke up for her at the trial, and they said there were extenuating circumstances, so she practically got off, didn't she? I mean, seeing the doctors say she can't live more than a matter of weeks in any case, I believe they've put her in a private hospital. You people who go into good service you do see things, though I must say it's the first time I've ever had a client with a reference from a murderess!"

Edward winced, and Mrs Baxby saw his hands tighten on the hem of his jacket. She was sufficiently tactful not to continue on those lines. She said, "What made you come back to me? I should have thought you'd have gone to a London registry. Once a man gets a chance in the West End——"

"I somehow wanted to come back to my own county."

"I see. Well, it's May now, and all this happened at the beginning of February. I suppose you've been resting?"

"I've been staying for three months with my parents at Tourlock, ma'am. I seemed to need the rest."

His once-clear brows were now drawn down into a level line, and there were two vertical furrows between them. He remembered all those nights at the cottage when he could not sleep for reliving that last day; and as long as he lived he thought he would still see Kinryce's face, the look of terror in those staring dead eyes, and all the blood.

"What kind of a situation were you thinking of?" asked Mrs Baxby.

He came back instantly and alertly to the present.

"Butler," he said.

"Oh no. No, I'm afraid not. I don't mean to suggest that you're not capable of it, but you're too young."

"I don't feel young."

"But there's the appearance. People expect a bit of age and dignity in a butler. He has to impress the other servants, you know, and have a firm hand if there's a big establishment. You might not find

it easy to control men servants older than yourself. Besides, just at the moment I haven't got any vacancy for a butler. Let me see . . ."

Mrs Baxby got out her book and began to sweep over the pages, whispering soundlessly to herself. "If you'd let me advise you—I mean, I have the experience——"

"I'm willing to listen to any suggestions," said Edward.

"Then I've got the very thing for you. Nursery footman."

"Nursery footman!" Edward's tone was nearly horrified. "Do you mean looking after babies?"

"It isn't quite as bad as that. I imagine that they are young people in the schoolroom. And I know you'd be very happy in the place; it's with such a lovely family—Lord and Lady Cedely at Merryns. I only send my best clients there. I do advise you to take it, Mr—Shrewsbury. It would be a stepping-stone."

Edward considered for a moment. What alternative was there?

He said, "All right. I'll try it."

So he went to Merryns in 1902, and he stayed there for the next twelve years.

2

"Edward!" That would be Sonia's voice, clear and high-pitched. Sonia calling, with her elf-pale face tilted and the golden freckles laid across her nose, and her cool, wide-eyed stare.

"Edward!" That was Matthew's gruff, excited tone, always sounding as though he were about to impart some delectable secret; Matthew loose-limbed and overgrown for his twelve years, tousle-headed, ardent

"Edward!" Bartholomew's shrill pipe, so imperious; little Barty in his shabby sailor suit, with one stocking down round his ankle, always eager for the freedom of the woods.

He would hear their voices—their childhood voices—as long as he lived. He thought he would even hear them when he was dying, for as the years went by they never grew less clear and gay in his memory than they were that first summer at Merryns.

"Edward! Where are you, Edward? We want you, Edward!"

Even Guy, home from Eton at the end of the summer half, would join in the cry. "Edward! I say, could you drop whatever you're doing and hold this bat while I whip the stuff round it? Good! That's got it."

Lord Cedely used to say jokingly, "Why ask my opinion about anything at all, when the ultimate authority is Edward?"

There was the first day of all, the day he arrived there. Merryns, though a vast house, looked homelike and inviting, built of dark grey stone and presenting ivy-covered walls. He approached it by a drive that ran through tangled shrubberies and suddenly emerged on the gravel sweep before the door. A gardener was sweeping the gravel.

"You're expected," he said. "I was told to take you straight in."

And in he was led, right through the front door with surprising informality, and shown into a small room full of boot-racks and gun-racks and two leaping spaniels and a toppling pile of wooden building-bricks.

"Wait here. I'll tell them you've come."

He stood there patting the spaniels, wondering whether he ought to set down his bag on the floor or keep it in his hand. Then he heard swift, tapping footsteps and a lady came into the room. She was much younger than he expected—only about his own age and not much more than a girl, tall in her trailing dress of spotted grey silk, her neck very long and graceful in its high collar of lace, her amber-coloured hair swept up to crown a heart-shaped face that was pale but warm, like cream.

"Good afternoon. I believe you've come from the registry at Shrewsbury—Mrs Baxby's. We never question *anybody* that Mrs Baxby sends. We just take them for granted. I hope you'll stay; I see you've brought your luggage."

"Thank you, m'lady. I hope I'll give satisfaction."

"I'm sure you will. I think you look very nice. You will be looking after my young sister and brothers in the schoolroom. And I am not 'm'lady'—that is my mother. You call me Miss Lintern, or just 'Miss'. My mother asked me to come down and see you, as she is kept to her room today. She hurt her ankle yesterday falling down the step in the scullery."

To Edward it was a matter of amazement that a lady of title should even know that she had a scullery. He must have shown his thoughts in his face, for the young lady said, "My mother is very thorough, and does not take cleanliness for granted anywhere in her house." She spoke primly, and in spite of her somewhat unconventional approach she seemed to have dignity. And what eyes she had! Her features were too irregular even for prettiness, but her eyes! Very wide apart, their depth and velvety softness affected Edward strangely. He found himself looking into Miss Lintern's eyes as she spoke to him, a thing which with his training he ought not to have done, but she looked into his too, very directly and candidly, and not without a hint of liking what she saw.

"I will call Martin," she said, "to show you your room. Martin is our other footman; we have no butler. Mrs Dodge the housekeeper sees to everything. But first, a word about your duties. You will work with Martin generally, as we entertain a good deal, and you will look after the schoolroom and serve schoolroom meals, and also wait on Nanny and Miss Jeffery the governess. I hope you won't find the work too much?"

"I'm sure I shan't, miss."

"My mother will also expect you to keep an eye on the children in their leisure, as Miss Jeffery is not very active."

"Very good, miss."

"Now I will call Martin, and when you have been up to your room he can bring you down to me in the schoolroom."

The room which Edward was to share with the other footman was a small, comfortably furnished attic with two beds. Martin himself was a dark, serious man of about thirty, a far from loquacious type, who explained to Edward in the first five minutes that his main interest in life was entomology. He had books about insects in a rack above his bed, and small mysterious boxes and cages arranged on his chest of drawers which Edward viewed without enthusiasm.

"Stag beetles," said Martin. "Young Matthew found me a beauty, but unfortunately it's another male."

Edward meekly accepted the idea that only the failure of young Matthew to discover a female stag beetle prevented his bedroom from becoming an entomological maternity hospital.

"That's your chest of drawers," Martin said. "You can unpack later. Put on your livery trousers and your day jacket, and we'll go downstairs. Do you like kids?"

"I've never had anything to do with them."

"They're not bad kids. Wild, but good-hearted. If they take to you, they'll pester you to death; if they don't take to you, heaven help you."

"You're not very reassuring."

Martin smiled. "You'll be all right. It's a good place. By the way, you'd better know that I'm not a noisy character. When I get to my room at night I like to read. I'm just telling you."

"I'm glad to know it. I read too."

"What do you read?"

"Poetry and classics."

"Oh. That suits me. Come along, friend."

Miss Lintern was waiting on the second floor. She sat in a high carved chair, and rose as Edward approached. All her movements had a kind of studied grace; her air of physical detachment and calm did not sit naturally on her. She gave Edward the impression that this cultivated reserve of hers was temporary, and cloaked a much more animated manner. She was acting a part; she was being the daughter of the house being the chatelaine of the house.

Her large, lovely eyes swept over him momentarily as though to appraise his appearance. She said, "Come this way."

She opened a door on a spacious, sunny room whose wide windows overlooked the gardens. On a bare wooden table stood a great bowl of purple lilac; an open cupboard showed stacks of well-worn books, and the floor was strewn with the properties of many hobbies. On their chairs at the table sat three children, who looked up with bright, interested eyes.

"This is Edward, the new footman," said Miss Lintern.

The three heads went to one side, the eyes widened.

"My young brothers, Matthew and Bartholomew. My sister

Sonia. You had better teach them not to strew their things on the floor. What is the table for?"

"There's no room," said the elder boy. "And what's the floor for?"

"Isobel, you are bossy," said the girl. She had two magnificent swinging plaits of Titian-red hair, and the pale colouring that usually goes with it.

"Clear the floor," Miss Lintern said. "Then you must show Edward where everything is kept." Her manner softened, the smile she gave was slow and exquisite; disturbing. "Tea for the children is in here, Edward, at five o'clock. Matthew will take you down to Mrs Dodge, who will tell you everything."

She went out and closed the door. The three children uncurled themselves, eyeing him.

"I say," said the elder boy, "are you any good at games?"

"What kind of games, sir?"

"I'm not 'sir' anything. I'm Matthew. That's Sonia and this is Bartholomew. You look all right. I like you." He turned to the others. "Do we like him?"

The girl nodded. "You mustn't mind Isobel being bossy. Have you any sisters and brothers?"

"Quite a lot."

She laughed. "Poor you!"

"Don't take any notice of her," the younger boy said. "About these games. I hope you're going to be good."

"What kind of games?"

"Invention games, of course."

"We had a corking game," said Matthew, "called Aerial Travel. You all climb a different tree, and then you move on to the next and the next, from branch to branch. The winner is the one who gets into the biggest number of trees without touching the ground. But Mamma stopped it when Sonia got black and blue. A pity! It was a spiffing game. But Nanny said you had come from London. I don't suppose you know anything about trees."

"I know all about trees. I come from the country."

"He comes from the country," repeated Sonia, "so he ought to be all right."

"Do you play cricket?" Matthew asked.

"I used to play with the boys on the village green when I was about your age."

"That'll suit Guy. Guy's our big brother."

The smaller boy looked at the other two. "Do you think we should tell him about our fairy?"

"Oh, have you got a fairy of your own?" Edward asked.

Bartholomew gave a delighted squeal. "I say! Isn't he decent? Most grown-ups would say, 'Don't be silly. You know at your age there aren't any fairies.'"

"Grown-ups are pretty loathsome," said Sonia.

"Miss Lintern said I was to tidy the room."

"Oh, we don't take any notice of Isobel."

"But I ought to try. Please won't you tell me where all these things go?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, be careful!" Bartholomew cried, hopping on one leg. "That's my scrap-book. Don't mix my dog pictures up with Matthew's horrible painting."

Edward went down on his knees. "I won't mix anything up, if you'll show me where they ought to go."

"In the cupboard! In the cupboard! That's my shelf; only everybody else puts their beastly things on it."

"Bags I the table drawer," said Sonia. She flopped on her knees beside Edward, and began to collect some rather soiled pieces of needlework. "I'm embroidering a big red S on simply everything I possess."

"You can't embroider it on your pencil-box, idiot," Matthew pointed out. "Or on the kitten."

"I'm making a coat for the kitten. Like a horse-blanket."

"Silly, silly, silly Sonia!"

"Beastly, beastly, beastly Barty!"

"Mucky Matthew!"

They did a little desultory tidying and rushed to the window

"It would be nice to go out after tea."

"After tea is geography. After tea is *always* geography."

"Why?" said Edward.

"You may well ask! We have lessons in the morning and lessons again after tea. Have you met la Jeffery yet?"

"Who is——?"

"Oh, you can't have. You're very new." Matthew smiled kindly. "I hope you'll be happy with us."

"That's what Mamma says to new people," said Barty. "Are you active?"

"I hope so," said Edward, puzzled.

"Then you'll take us out for walks. We walk to the village, but we generally end up in the woods."

They chattered on, with the swift insight of children accepting him as a friend. Edward felt relaxed, comfortable. He had come into a different world—an innocent, joyous world. The company of children, which he had viewed with apprehension, was going to be the reward for any toil and sacrifice.

Matthew said, "You go down now and see about our tea. And don't let la Dodge diddle, flummox, or bewitch you just because you're new. We have jam *and* honey. Not *or*! See to that, won't you, Edward? And you take Nanny's tea to her room, and la Jeffery's to *her* room. You'll soon learn."

"If I do anything wrong," said Edward humbly, "you must tell me."

In her room, Miss Jeffery said, "Come in!" to the gentle tap on the door. [She was a woman who in her early forties had decided that she was middle-aged and entitled to a good deal of rest.] She had no liking for the open air, and her idea of bliss was to spend the warm spring afternoons in her room writing innumerable letters to her scattered relations. This room was a little home to her. All her treasures were here: the bits of china, the framed photographs, the cushions she had worked, the chair-backs she laundered every day or two, the fire-screen her sister had painted with water-lilies and a drooping stork, the convenient low table of Indian brass polished until the pattern had almost disappeared, the large purple writing-case she had owned since she was seventeen and which had certainly worked its passage through her life.

She was a woman of erudition, the daughter of a clergyman who was more scholar than priest. All her childhood had been spent in study. From her father she had learned Greek and Latin until she could handle those languages unflatteringly, and in them compose little odes and acrostics. At home she had taken pride in being a blue-stocking, unaware that her learning was of no practical use in life. At twenty there was no career for her but that of governess; and she spent several painful years in discovering that children in general thought her Latin and Greek a bore, and a little elementary history and geography was all they could and would absorb. So gradually she let her mental equipment go, and now at forty-three she found she could get on very well without using her brain at all. No longer did she read for pleasure her Ovid and her Livy, her Virgil and her Plato, in fact she now found great difficulty in doing so, and stumbled over the simplest translation. Not all her situations had been as pleasant as this one. She had been in charge of the education of Sonia, Matthew, and Bartholomew Lintern for five years, and had safely conducted them from pothooks to *The Child's Garden of Verses*, and it seemed to her that she was in a safe and happy position where no harshness could touch her. Lessons were not arduous—nothing was arduous here. She could relax and enjoy herself in her own way, writing and receiving so many letters that every day brought a small pleasure in the way of news from an old friend. These letters, like her own, were compendiums of information, packets of daily existence, containing newspaper cuttings, photographs, snippets of cloth—"just to show you, my dear, what my new winter dress is to be like, so that you can picture me wearing it", pressed flowers—"the violets are so large this year, I thought you would like to see for yourself", wedding invitations, funeral cards—"please return when you have seen it, as I want to keep it in my album", and charming verses copied from *The Girls' Own Paper*. And sometimes a small parcel would arrive, with, "Please to write something in Dorothy's album and return at your convenience", and with pink cheeks Miss Jeffery would inscribe in careful copper-plate

a sentimental tribute about helping lame dogs over stiles, and sign it with a flourish, "Mary Caroline Jeffery, ever your friend."

She had let herself get fat, for she enjoyed her food tremendously and took as little exercise as possible. It did not worry her; in middle-age a woman was past caring about her appearance, and Miss Jeffery had never been particular about hers so long as she was clean and neat. These last weeks, before Lady Cedely had hit upon the bright idea of engaging a nursery footman, had been extremely trying. She had dreaded the daily walk with her charges, for she could not keep up with them even when they were docile enough to stay by her side; and as often as not she finished up by returning home alone, hoping that her ladyship would not be looking out of the window to see and inquire, "Where are the children?" The children, of course, would by now be ranging the woods. They never kept to the road unless compelled to. "In the woods" was no answer to give to her ladyship; it meant scarlet faces, torn clothes, and undesirable wild habits. As often as she dared, Miss Jeffery fell back upon the excuse of a cold to stay indoors, but even a cold was supposed to be the better for a nice breath of fresh air. With all her heart Miss Jeffery hoped that the new footman would be a pleasant, agreeable young man, fond of children, and with a perfect passion for walking.

"Come in!" she cried happily, for tea-time was one of her delights, especially when she was privileged to enjoy it alone in her own room, and not at the scramble of the schoolroom table.

A strange young man entered with the tray. He was tall, broad-shouldered, handsome, with good features, chestnut hair, and level blue eyes. The new footman! Miss Jeffery could tell at a glance that he was the kind of young man she had dreamed of. With that frame he must be athletic. With that countenance he must be fond of children, and simple enough to share their tastes.

Thank heaven! thought Miss Jeffery, smiling all over her face.

"I think you must be the new nursery footman?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"What is your name?"

"Edward Shrewsbury, ma'am."

"A very nice name. Have you met your young charges?"

"The children, ma'am? Oh yes."

"Such dear children. You're fond of children?"

"I haven't had a great deal to do with them, but the young gentlemen and the young lady seem very nice indeed."

"And so energetic! Are you energetic, Edward?"

"I think so, ma'am."

"Lady Cedely likes them to have plenty of exercise. You will be able to take them for a walk every day. You'll like that."

"I'm sure I shall." (He didn't say it sarcastically either!)

"What have you brought me for tea, Edward? Look, put the tray

down on my nice brass table—there. I like a low table quite close to me. Oh, toast! And the cake looks quite delicious.”

“Shall I pour your tea, ma’am?”

“How nice and attentive you are! But I really prefer to pour it for myself; no one else knows exactly. I hope you will be happy here.”

“I think I shall. Everybody seems very kind.”

“Oh, but they are. Such a pleasant, pleasant household. Dear Lady Cedely is so sweet, and his lordship—have you met his lordship?”

“Not yet, ma’am.”

“The finest type of country gentleman. But I must not dally over my tea, as the children have an hour of lessons, until half-past six. Lady Cedely prefers them to have the afternoons free, to be out of doors. So necessary for children, don’t you think?”

Funny old girl! thought Edward, mentally giving Miss Jeffery about ten years more than her birth certificate entitled her to. She was the first governess he had ever met, and he had always pictured them as bossy creatures, with sharp tongues and eyes that missed nothing.

He picked up the second tray and moved on to Nanny’s door.

Nanny was sitting in her room knitting a scarf in his house colours for Guy. She had been in the family for twenty-three years—since Isobel was born—and she had brought them all up, though Guy was her favourite. She was past sixty now, but, unlike Miss Jeffery, she aimed at feeling much younger, and only owned to forty-five. She was glad the family was so unusually spaced out, it had made her position secure, and there was plenty to do for the younger ones still. By the time Barty was off her hands—he was still only ten—Guy might be married and there would be a baby for her to go to. Nanny had it all planned out.

She was as devoted as she was stern, a woman of a very limited world—the world of the nursery. This room where she sat had once been the nursery, and she delighted to keep it as it had always been, with the well-polished oilcloth on the floor and the bright rag rug in front of the fire—Nanny had a fire there winter and summer—and the tall brass fender that was also a fireguard, with Matthew’s and Barty’s vests hanging over it to air.

She still made the boys take their nightly baths there in front of the fire, in a big old-fashioned enamel bath-tub for which cans of hot water had to be carried, and she still chased them with outspread towel as they darted naked and dripping round the room. All she asked of life was that she might have her health and strength to go on doing this kind of thing until her dying day, and children to do it for. She was getting very near-sighted and dependent on the steel-rimmed spectacles she hated, but fortunately she could knit by ‘feel’, as she called it, and making anything for Guy was such a pleasure. She pictured him wearing the scarf on a cold autumn day

when those Eton boys did such silly things as pushing a ball about in the mud.

Nanny had very few possessions of her own, for she had always spent all her money on the children, though her ladyship had often 'spoken' to her about this. "It's a pity," she would grumble, "if I can't buy them a few sweets."

But the 'few sweets' would as often as not be an elaborate satiated box of chocolates, purchased on her half-day out in Over Chorley, so that she might have a week's pleasure in doling them out a few at a time, with careful regard for each one's tastes. Barty only liked the hard ones, Matthew was a terror for anything with nuts in it, while Sonia had a nasty habit of biting off the chocolate coating and rejecting all but the creams. They were all well grounded in Nanny's little maxims, a basis for living. Handsome is as handsome does. An ounce of forethought is worth a bucket of repentance. If the wind changes, your face'll stay like that. Lightning never strikes twice in the same place. Laugh before seven, cry before eleven. Tomorrow never comes, so Do It Today.

Interference with her routine was something she had never stood and never would stand. In her nursery she was to herself a queen, to others a stubborn old mule. Her attitude to those who besides herself had any direct part in the children's lives was that of a she-bear guarding her cubs from the white hunter. Most of all—like all other nannies—she disliked the governess. For all she teaches them, thought Nanny, I could do it myself. If I'd only given myself a bit of book-learning when I was young enough!

She loved to induce them to bring their homework up to her room on winter evenings and do it at her table, consulting her flatteringly as they went on, and she would pretend to all kinds of knowledge that was not hers.

"Nanny, what's the capital of Portugal?"

"Portugal? Well, now. That's something every little boy ought to know without asking. Think!"

"But I don't know, Nanny. What is it?"

"I know," said Sonia. "Lisbon."

"There!" said Nanny. "You took the word out of my mouth."

"Oh, Nanny, you are clever," said Barty. "Thank you very much. I thought you'd know, only Sonia went and blurted it out."

And Nanny would smile and preen herself; it was her hour of triumph over Miss Jeffery, her hour of all-sufficiency for the children, and as if never satisfied with their appearance, she would get up and fuss over them as they sat at the table, re-tying Sonia's hair-ribbons with many little finger-pats, re-settling the boys' round white collars, and seeing that they all had their stockings well pulled up.

But now at five o'clock she was carefully knitting and inch by inch

the scarf grew longer, when, after a tap on the door, a completely strange young man walked into the room with a tray in his hands.

"Good afternoon, Nanny," he said cheerfully. "I've brought your tea, and the children are having theirs, and the nursery's all tidy."

The new nursery footman! And 'Nanny' indeed—what impudence!

"Young man!" she said, "I'll have you know——" But she couldn't go on with it; he looked so honest, so innocent, and so disarming. And when at eight o'clock that night Mrs Dodge the house-keeper dropped in for the cup of cocoa they always enjoyed together, Nanny found herself saying, "... I took to him at once—couldn't help myself. He wasn't trying any impertinence on with me, he was just being his natural self. So I called him in and we sat down, and I told him all about the children—fairly opened my heart—and he listened as if he really cared. That was what touched me, Mrs Dodge, as if he really cared; and how many young men would have done that? I know character when I see it, and I shall tell her ladyship that he can be safely trusted with the children. Oh yes, I know what I'm talking about."

"He seems to have made a very good impression on everybody," said Mrs Dodge, "and all I hope is that he won't get spoiled. That's all I hope."

3

"My dear, what do you think of your new nursery footman? Six foot of superb young animal. If he was a horse, I'd give three hundred guineas for him."

"Henry, you really should not talk like that. Animal, indeed. Perhaps you would like to employ him in the stable and find me a young groom who is also like a human being to look after the schoolroom?"

Lady Cedely smiled delightedly up at her tall husband. They were a charming and devoted pair, their lives centred in their home and family. He knew that when he had finished his morning round of stables, greenhouses, and Home Farm he would find her here in her sitting-room ready for his little bits of news, and they would have a happy hour together before lunch discussing the things that were dear to them in this lovely, well-arranged world of theirs.

He liked those soft blouses she always wore. He liked to sit on the arm of her chair and look down on her delicately sloping shoulders in their lace and silk, her long, arched neck in its well-fitting, whale-boned collar, the curve of her down-bent cheek and the thick, fair lashes that lay upon it, and above all the great shining crown of pale-red hair with its interwoven puffs and coils, looking far too heavy for the small head to carry.

She was the daughter of a poor but intensely proud Irish land-owning family; she had good looks, intelligence, grace, and—after

she came to live in England—a great regard for the established order that seemed to work so well in social life. Conservative and conventional to a degree, her natural and friendly familiarity with her household seemed like a contradiction in terms, and caused some surprise. She would not have permitted any part of the life of her house to go on unknown and unsupervised by herself, that was not in her nature; it was not enough to give orders to her housekeeper, she must herself interview the cook, and in the kitchen too; and what was more she would accept a cup of coffee down there and sit drinking it at a corner of the kitchen table, chatting freely. This was simply a kind of feudalism. The household was her own possession, her little unit of society, and every member of it was part of her family. She as queen and mother was within her rights to condescend; no one had the right to presume.

"My dear," said Lord Cedely, "I have had an eight-page letter from Mrs Baxby at the registry about Edward Shrewsbury, explaining how in his last situation in London there was a murder, and Edward had to give evidence at the trial, from which he emerged without a stain on his character, and no one could 'hold it against him'. Why should we wish to hold it against him, I wonder? Mrs Baxby goes on to say that probably I read about this case in the papers. I do not read such cases and I do not read such papers! What does she take me for?"

"I would rather judge Edward on his merits," said Lady Cedely. "But at the same time I must order him not to talk of any unpleasant experiences he may have had in London before the children. Their imaginations are too lively as it is. Now tell me all the news, Henry. Did you see anything very nice in the gardens this morning?"

Lord Cedely's was not an old title, he was only the third baron, but twelve generations of his family had lived at Merryns, and each had pulled down and reconstructed until there was literally nothing left of the original house. Instead a rambling structure began to spread and sprawl, as successive owners flung out new wings and windows. The result was an architectural curiosity, and yet it was Merryns, and had its own beauty and rich appeal. There was no other place in England which remotely resembled it, except Sandringham House, and King Edward had laughingly remarked on this the previous autumn at a week-end shooting party, with a good-natured, "Cedely, you're a copy-cat."

"Sir, your house is the result of consideration," said Lord Cedely, "while mine is a jigsaw puzzle devised by one idiot child and put together by another."

He loved Merryns so much that he never wanted to leave it, rarely in fact did leave it. Others went to London in the spring, to Scotland in the autumn, to the sun lands in the cold English winter-time, but Lord Cedely stayed on his own dear estate. He loved Merryns all the year round, but he worshipped it in the summer when he could

walk on his green lawns and dream under his heavy-crowned trees, see his sleek cattle stand knee deep in the daisied pastures and fruit ripening in his orchards, smell his glorious roses, and watch sunsets beyond the blue hills of Wales. Thank God his wife and children shared his tastes! They all loved country life; Guy his heir was following in his own footsteps and showing the liveliest interest in horses and cattle and the administration of the estate; the young ones were like little gipsies for roaming the woods and exploring every acre of the place in their games of make-believe, and even Isobel——

"Ethne," he said, "do you realise it is May again? The London house has not been opened for two years."

She came and stood by his side at the open window and looked down at the lilacs and laburnums blooming in the small enclosed garden below, her own special garden.

"For my part I would never open it. I have had enough of London seasons. I should do it, of course, for Isobel; but when I mentioned it to her she said she didn't wish to go."

"Shouldn't she wish to go? The balls and parties——"

"She really does prefer to remain here with our own local society. Why not? She is more likely, at her age, to find a suitable husband here than in London among all the young debutantes."

They had taken Isobel to London for her presentation, and for two successive seasons Lady Cedely had chaperoned her daughter through an exhausting and increasingly active round of brilliant social events. Isobel had been popular, perhaps too popular, for though according to the standards of the day she was no conventional beauty, she had the gift—to her mother a dubious one—of attracting men round her like wasps round jam; therefore, unlike less favoured girls, she did not accept her first suitor with becoming gratitude, but found it more fun to play off one against the other, knowing that any number of them would always be within reach of her hand.

To her mother this was appalling. Isobel was getting a name for not being a serious girl; Isobel was a flirt, and the word itself was shameful. Two whole seasons, with definite offers of marriage actually rejected, and yet every dance programme filled! Isobel was twenty-three now, and it was a great relief to her mother that after those two rather nerve-racking seasons she had suddenly tired of the game and refused to go to the house in Eaton Square again. She was quite happy, she said, at home—and, thought Lady Cedely, a great deal safer. Under their own roof, at their own table, in the atmosphere of their perfect home life, she was bound soon to realise where her true destiny lay.

Lady Cedely pressed her husband's arm lightly within her own.

"There must be something wrong with us all that we rarely want to go away; but, then, we have such nice neighbours, and none of them seem to care about going away either. What a perfect day it is! Do you smell the lilac? Henry, I do believe it is going to be warm

enough to have tea on the lawn for the first time. Tell them to take out the chairs and tables in readiness."

"Is that what you want?"

"I'm looking forward to it already."

"Then I shall also tell the sun to go on shining. You are to have your own way in everything. But what about that ankle? Are you sure it is fit for walking in the garden?"

"Certainly it is. And I believe there are quite a number of people coming for tea today, so it will be like a little fête."

"No more sculleries!"

"Why not? My scullery is as much a room as my sitting-room is; it is part of my home, and I want to know what it looks like. Besides, I found the kitchenmaid a most admirable young person and a good needlewoman. We talked about sewing."

"You are just a wild incorrigible Irishwoman!" said Lord Cedely.

"I think there is nowhere on earth like Merryns, and no household so happy as ours. We have so much to be thankful for, Henry."

"A beloved family," he said, lightly touching her shining hair, "and a world of peace."

When Edward took the mid-morning milk to the schoolroom that day, Bartholomew said, "Are you going to take us for a walk this afternoon? Miss Jeffery says you can."

"I hope you really want to, Edward," said Miss Jeffery, hardly able to conceal her pleasure at the idea.

"She isn't active enough for us," said Matthew.

"Matthew! Don't be impertinent." Miss Jeffery frowned.

"I meant it kindly. We'll take you to the Home Farm, Edward, and from there we could go on and do a bit of otter hunting."

"Matthew thinks there are otters in the brook there," said Sonia, "but there aren't."

"There are!"

"Sucks!" said Sonia.

"I doubt if you will ever be a young lady," said Miss Jeffery.

"I wish," said Sonia, "that I had been born before there were any young ladies."

"There have always been young ladies," observed Miss Jeffery, primly triumphant.

"Nest, Princess of Britain, was not a young lady. She was a warrior."

"And what happened to her? She was sold by the Romans as a slave."

"That," said Sonia, "must have been fun."

"Edward," said Miss Jeffery, "you may go. The children will be ready for you at half-past two."

He found himself looking forward to half-past two. They set out punctually, and Matthew said, "Walk properly until we get round the corner of the fruit-garden, then they can't see us anyway."

It was one of those days in May whose breath-taking beauty has a spiritual quality, as though the very essence of joy and summer had materialised in springing green and exquisite flowers. The sky was blue to the horizon with a few lazy white clouds; trees had their fresh enamelled foliage, everything was in its first tender growth, the tulips were like globes of coloured light. The scented air was rich and yet exhilarating, and far across the parkland the broad spread of woodland was a more hazy blue than the sky.

"Run!" cried Sonia. "Run, run, run!"

They scattered and ran, for sheer upsurge of delight, and Sonia was ahead, with her full blue skirt flying and the heavy lace of her yoke flopping as she ran, and her straw hat hanging down her back by the strained strings. Edward ran too, the boys ran, their black-stockinged legs flashing; round the walled fruit-garden, across a cobbled lane, down a long grass ride, out into the road, and then into the open fields, where the fat sleek cows, enjoying their first freedom of the year, stood staring at them. The heavy hawthorn was tipped with pink and white; brilliant yellow of kingcups lay in the hollows, the young wheat was springing.

"Do you like farms, Edward?" Barty asked when breathlessness at last slowed them down.

"Yes, I do."

"Do you know anything about farming?"

"Only what I picked up when I was a boy in the country. I know birds' nests—look, I guarantee to find you one inside a minute."

He parted the hawthorns and showed them a nest, tenderly lined, with four blue eggs.

"Oh, may we take one? Birds can't count."

"How do you know?"

Sonia giggled. "It's no use taking one, Barty. You'll only squash it. Let's get on to the farm and see if there are any baby pigs."

The farmer's wife was honoured by the visit, and provided glasses of fresh milk, warm buns, and a visit to the sty where sixteen piglets climbed ruthlessly over each other's backs.

"The poor little squealing runt gets nothing," said Matthew. "Has to live on air."

"They're hard if you pick them up," said Bartholomew. "Hard like stones, not soft like pups."

"Come on, let's go to the brook and look for otters."

"There aren't any otters."

"I tell you, there are."

"I tell you, there aren't"

"Liar!"

"Beast!"

It was the attraction of the brook itself that drew them, the gushing of green water that bubbled over the sunlit stones.

Shoes and stockings were stripped off and placed safely on the

bank, trouser legs were rolled as high as they would go, Sonia's skirts wound round her waist and pinned by the kindly farmer's wife.

"She's a tomboy, for sure. I was just the same at her age. Lord's daughter or farmer's daughter, they're all alike."

They all splashed about in the stream, poking under the alders, venturing into colder, deeper pools where the water was brown and strong in its undercurrents; they sat down on large flat stones, kicking up spray.

Edward asked, "Are you allowed to do this when you're out with me?"—and thought that in any case it was a bit too late to ask.

"It doesn't matter what we do, so long as we aren't too soaked. Do you like it here, Edward?"

"Of course I do."

"There might be trout here," said Matthew. "Can you tickle trout?"

"I've seen it done, but I've never tried."

"It would be spiffing to tickle trout."

"What time do we have to go back?"

Matthew looked disgusted. "That's grown-ups all over. Always thinking about having to go back. What's the time now?"

Edward looked at his watch. "Half-past three."

"Good! We haven't to be back until half-past four."

Legs were dried inadequately with pocket handkerchiefs, and thick black stockings and shoes resumed.

"They feel horrible," Bartholomew grumbled. "I wish we were gipsy children."

"Then you wouldn't live in a beautiful house like Merryns."

"Then we wouldn't have Nanny and la Jeffery to bother us!"

They walked home by a different route, through the woods. It was slow progress because they had to keep stopping to show Edward their favourite haunts.

"Another time," he kept telling them. "There are all the days to come. The whole summer."

They came out upon the drive at last, and saw before them a coloured picture of the great lawn with a group of people arranged under the cedar and the cool house as background, deep windows gleaming above the flower borders.

"Tea on the lawn," said Barty. "Let's slither round the other way."

They dived back into the shrubbery, skirted the house, and went in by the side door. The children shot upstairs to their quarters.

"That you, Edward?" said Martin. "You're to help me serve tea outside. Get into your livery, quick."

In the cubby-hole beside the pantry Edward washed hastily, smoothed his hair, and put on the dark grey livery faced with blue. Then, under Martin's direction, he began to carry out the racks of sandwiches and cakes. The picture under the cedar tree came alive.

On cane chairs the ladies sat, poised with their straight backs. Below their tiny waists the wide skirts flowed to the clipped grass, the silk of their sleeves shimmered in the sun, lace scarves flowed from their shoulders, on their heads were huge hats like flower-gardens with birds and ribbons among the blooms. They talked with animation, moving their small, fine hands. The men stood about, in formal clothes, moustached, smiling.

Lady Cedely looked happy. "Draw that table close to me, Edward. Did you have a nice walk with the children?"

"Oh yes, m'lady."

"You mustn't let them wear you out. Thank you, Martin, the tea-tray."

The elaborate silver tray with its tea equipage was set down. The two footmen began to spread the tinkling cups; Edward placed cream and sugar on a small salver.

Lady Cedely was talking to a man of about thirty, pale, dark, conventionally well dressed.

"Hugh, you have been neglecting us, you are almost a stranger, you really must come more often now the summer is here."

"Dear Lady Cedely, I have been away; but since you are so rash in your open hospitality I warn you that I intend hardly to be off your doorstep."

"And how is Chorley Beeches looking?"

"Rather charming, I think. Won't you come over and see, and bring Miss Isobel? I'll arrange a small luncheon party for you, and then you can travel in the cool of the morning and stay on for tea."

"That sounds delightful. You may have guessed by now that we have no intention of going to town. We're all too lazy, and have such delightful neighbours here. Who could we want to see more?"

"Well, I for one am quite satisfied with our country life, Lady Cedely. We might even arrange a ball or two, in case Miss Isobel should miss the fun of the season."

"That would be lovely, and I'm sure Isobel would enjoy it far more than any London ball. When we are all so happy here, why spoil it by travelling far away? Now won't you go over there, and tell Isobel yourself what we have been plotting together?"

"Shall I be welcome?"

"She is only talking to Colonel Wynn, and young people are always happiest together. Run along now!"

By the close of this conversation Edward was ready to carry the tea. The scene had shifted. The man called Hugh was now at Isobel's side; they seemed to be talking in an animated way together. Isobel was all in white, with a rose-coloured boa round her shoulders and a large white hat trimmed with a single rose. Her face was vivid, she raised her eyes in quick, flashing glances. Her companion seemed lost to all but his interest in her.

Edward stood with his salver waiting to be noticed.

"—so I don't see how you are ever going to ride with me, because I only ride before breakfast; and quite frankly, Hugh, I think you are a little lazy. You once told me you were."

"If I thought there was a chance of a ride with you, Isobel, I would be here at five."

She laughed at him, dropping her eyes and then lifting them suddenly to his face. "You would be very cold and bored before I came out at eight!"

"At eight! I don't call that early. I could easily be here by eight."

"I didn't tell you, but I always ride alone. It's quite a ritual with me."

"Then it was heartless of you to raise my hopes."

"Tea, Miss Lintern?" Edward said, offering his salver. "Cream and sugar? Tea, sir?"

"Ah, good," said the man. His rather sombre face was lightened when he smiled. "What a lovely day this is."

"Edward," said Isobel, "you look quite worn out. It is the fault of those dreadful children." She turned to her companion. "This is Edward, our new schoolroom footman. He has the awful task of taking the children for their afternoon walk. Can you think of a worse form of hard labour?"

"I rather envy him. I like kids."

"Oh, *Hugh!*" Her beautiful eyes moved round to Edward in a sly, amused glance. "I hope you feel satisfied. Sir Hugh doesn't seem to think you are a martyr."

A shaky sensation inside him seemed to communicate itself to his fingers. The salver became unsteady. For an instant he felt more breathless than when racing across the fields with the children.

"And where did you get to this afternoon?" she asked indulgently.

"To a farm, miss. And we paddled in a stream."

"Really? Did you hear that, Hugh? They paddled in a stream."

"I'd paddle in any stream the minute you invited me, Isobel."

She gave her shoulders a twist; the soft rose-coloured boa fell and both men plunged down to rescue it. Edward won. For reward he had a soft and melting glance, and a "Thank you, Edward!"

Suddenly he caught Martin's fixed and frowning eye. He caught up the salver and moved on guiltily to another group of people.

"Don't dally," said Martin severely as he passed.

"They were talking to me."

"Well, don't let them talk to you. By the way, that's Sir Hugh Mannot with her. He's supposed to be The One."

"Oh!"

"Those old dowagers want more tea. Get over there—quick."

The rich sunlight lay across the lawn; silver glittered, tea-cups twinkled. People said, "It's as warm as July. How beautiful the first tea-party of summer is, out here in the garden."

The noise of conversation mingled with soft natural sounds, the

hum of insects, the twittering of birds. Some of the younger people began to call for croquet, but Lady Cedely protested. It was too early in the season; the lawn was not hard enough; the hoops were all stored away in some garden shed, but they should be produced for 'next time' and the children given the task of setting them up.

"And the children, having done what they consider the hard work, will insist on playing," said Miss Lintern, with a mocking smile, "and we shall all be lamed for life. They play like savages."

"Do savages really play croquet, Miss Isobel?" someone asked.

"Oh, but surely!" She widened her beautiful eyes. "Only savages could have invented such a game."

Lord Cedely was struggling with an unwieldy camera and a large square of black velvet, imploring people to stand still.

"Oh, Henry, it is not worth while," his wife said "You will never get a pretty picture without the colour."

An artist could have captured for all time that flowery scene of bright summer in an age now vanished; and so did Edward's heart capture it and transfer it to memory. Relinquishing the past, he let himself drift in time and tune with this new life where there was no harsh sound or sordid scene. Like a swimmer suddenly transported from a cold to a warm climate, he let himself slip into the gentle stream of lulling, comforting waters, existing only to wash away the past. Time remembered, grief forgotten.

4

In the evening Lady Cedely sent for him to come to her sitting-room.

She was seated at her writing-table, upon which stood a bowl of wallflowers. The pretty room was full of their perfume. It was furnished in cool pinks and mauves; the walls were covered with gilt-framed pictures, and there were many small cushion-filled chairs, and tables heaped with the things she used—needlework, velvet bags, trinkets, books.

"Come in, Edward; I want to speak to you." Her smile was winning. "I was very pleased with your service this afternoon."

"Thank you, m'lady."

"Did you enjoy our little party?" It was typical of her that she should wish the servants who waited upon her guests also to enjoy the party. She would have been disappointed if they had not.

Not yet knowing her well, Edward was surprised by her question, and yet, recognising the sincere interest and concern behind it, he replied, "I thought it was beautiful. The flowers, the cedar trees, the lovely people."

She looked delighted. "How perceptive you are! I appreciate that. I have just written in my diary, 'Today summer spoke to us for the first time this year, and her voice was very sweet and as rich as the scent of the stocks under my window.'"

"That is beautiful, m'lady. It has been a lovely day."

"Come and sit down here opposite me. Draw up that little chair."

"M'lady?"

"Why, yes. I want to talk to you, and I can't talk to anyone who is standing up. And, Edward, while we are in conversation you need not call me, 'm'lady' with every breath. Please be natural and at home with me. Are you comfortable? That's much better."

She thought for a moment, and went on, "Lord Cedely and I have heard that you had some unpleasant experiences in your last situation."

Taken by surprise, alarm showed in his eyes.

"Yes," he said warily.

"Don't look upset, Edward. The last thing I want is to embarrass you. I know perfectly well that there is no reflection whatever on your character. I believe you were very unfortunate."

"Yes."

"A young man in your position is not responsible for what his employers do, and in your case I believe that it was very bad indeed."

Deep horizontal lines came into his forehead.

"I don't want to talk about it, m'lady, if you please. If you don't mind. I don't even want to think about it. I'm trying to put it out of my mind, and this beautiful place has helped so. I was thinking this afternoon——"

He hesitated.

"Well?" she asked gently.

"That there has been such a transformation in my life, and that the beautiful can obliterate the bad."

"You speak like an educated man!"

"Self-educated."

"I admire you for it. You couldn't bring yourself to tell me about your unhappy experience? Would it help you to do so?"

"I would much rather not. It wouldn't help to keep such memories alive by putting them into words. I never intend to speak of it."

"That is what I hoped to hear. I know you mean what you say. You have been out with my children this afternoon, and I believe you all enjoyed yourselves. I have had a glowing account from them; you have made yourself popular with them."

"Thank you."

"Edward, I want you to know that although my children are apparently rather wild and irresponsible, they have been very well grounded in character, in duty and morality. I place these two last even above good health. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly."

"His lordship and I believe that there is nothing—nothing in the world—to compare with moral worth and uprightness. We are all placed in our own station in life, to live in it and enhance it by our conduct. There is an obligation on us to do so, never to falter or fall

from the standards set for us by ancestry, tradition, birth, training. All my children have been so grounded and trained, and for people like us there is also the matter of example. Do you know why I am speaking to you like this?"

"Yes, m'lady. You are warning me never to conduct myself or to speak in a way that would be offensive or harmful to the children, and I assure you you need not worry at all."

Her pleasure and relief glowed in her face.

"I think you have an admirable idea of your duty. We all like you very much, you are an acquisition to our household. I promise you that, in our turn, no member of our family will ever give you cause to be ashamed of us. We all base our lives upon the highest ideals of social and Christian duty. Do you go regularly to church?"

"Whenever my duty permits me."

"You will be able to go every Sunday evening with the other servants. I have arranged the meals and work to allow this. We never entertain on a Sunday evening and require very little service then. Now tell me something about your family. I like to know about my servants' homes; it helps me to understand them."

Edward told her. She listened with warm attention, and he was surprised and flattered that she was so sincerely interested.

"We shall have many chats, you and I," she said. "If ever you are worried or doubtful about anything, please feel that you can come straight to me here and talk it out. I say this to all my servants, and they always have access to me. The same thing applies to his lordship; he will always be ready to give you friendly help and advice. I am a strict disciplinarian in my household, but I could not bear to feel that there was any gulf between me and you. I have no sympathy with those households where family and staff live on two different sides of a barrier of social status. I hope you have noticed that this house has a happy atmosphere?"

"I have—already. Everyone seems so contented here."

"I believe they are, and I want it to be so. You will work all the better for it. You respect us; we respect you."

"How very understanding you are, m'lady. It is so rare——"

Her gentle face was wreathed in laughter. "Ah, but you see I am just a wild Irishwoman at heart, and that may account for it, as well as for my children's harum-scarum natures. Now run along. I am very satisfied. I would not wish for a better companion for the children."

To Edward this conversation seemed to crown the day. Already the spirit of this sympathetic house seemed to be enfolding him with a promise of the happiest service, in an atmosphere of friendship and understanding. He liked the other servants, for they seemed to be well chosen, the kind of people who would fit in with the standards set by Lord and Lady Cedely. Those high standards were of a kind that within a few years were to be derided and labelled Victorian, as

the new century reaching out for new freedom discarded the ideals of morality, tradition, and *noblesse oblige* as comic or outworn. But here at Merryns in 1902 they ruled the household.

Edward's fellow servants were familiar with the details of the Kinryce Case; had read all about it, for it had been a *cause célèbre*; and the fact that the new footman had actually been valet to the infamous Major Kinryce caused a sensation below stairs at Merryns. They soon discovered that there was to be no revelation, no question answered. Edward would not talk about his last situation, would deliberately absent himself from any discussion about it. If at first they thought him a spoil-sport—the bird who would not sit up to be shot at—they soon began to respect him for his reticence.

He was popular. Mrs Dodge the housekeeper and Nanny, who set the tone of the house, doted on him. Mrs Brain, the head cook, who was apt to look suspiciously on new servants, could not find a fault in Edward Shrewsbury. Martin, his room mate, though taciturn, became his friend. His path through domestic life was made smooth.

When in after years he looked back upon that first summer at Merryns, he saw it as a time of enchantment, without a cloud to mar its grace. It had a fairy-tale quality, for he himself was carefree, and it seemed in retrospect that there was never such a summer and that the sun shone every day from a cloudless sky. There was laughter everywhere that summer: the children's mirth and his own; magic laughter belonging to a magic time.

He got up every morning in happy anticipation of the day: his work was full of new interests, everything he did seemed to hold an element of joyful surprise in that lovely place among those pleasant, gracious people in the close, warm little world of their own making. It seemed that nothing harsh or rude could ever enter there.

Soon after his arrival he said to Martin, "Where is there to go on my half-day?"

"Most of us go to Chorley," Martin said. "It's a nice little market town, and you can have a look at Sir Hugh Mannot's place—Chorley Beeches—a fine place. You've seen him visiting here. There's a good little pub too, the Green Huntsman, where they do you a first-class dinner for ninepence, and you can sit and have a chat with the locals—all very friendly, if you care for that sort of thing."

"Is that what you do?"

"Me? Oh no, at this time of the year I generally go moth-hunting."

"Moths! In the daytime?"

"That's where you show your ignorance," said Martin scornfully. "You'd call them butterflies. But I'll give you a tip. Slip off before the children notice you, or you'll have them tagging along."

Edward managed this perfectly, and after a five-mile drive in the carrier's cart spent a pleasant day idling round the old town, ad-

miring the seventeenth-century buildings and the ancient church, and buying a few trifles in the shops; and then strolling a few hundred yards outside the town to gaze at the enormous gates of Chorley Beeches, with their proud stone lions and the mule-long drive beyond.

Next morning at seven-thirty, as usual, he woke the boys with glasses of hot water on a tray.

"Good morning, Master Matthew. Your hot water."

Matthew dragged a sleepy, rumpled head off the pillow, and grunted, "That's no way to wake a chap. Have a bit of imagination. Couldn't you say, 'The poison, sire'?"

"Now who on earth would say 'The poison, sire'? It doesn't make sense. What about, 'The goblet, my liege'?"

"Yes, that's much better. Try it on Barty—Barty! Wake up, it's your beastly hot water."

"The goblet, my liege," said Edward, shaking Barty's shoulder.

"Oh, spiffing!" said Barty, bobbing up. "I say, Edward," he added reproachfully, "where were you yesterday? You gave us the slip!"

"I'm sorry," Edward confessed, caught out. "I went over to Chorley for the half-day."

"Well, another time tell us, and we'll go with you. What sort of a day is it?"

Both boys leapt out of bed and rushed in their flowing nightshirts to the window. "Oh, gorgeous! Look at the blue haze. That means another beautiful day."

Pleasant noises were already coming from the stable yard—the clank of buckets, the whistling of grooms—and soon, with a sweet jingle and a clip-clop, Lord Cedely and his elder daughter came riding out and turned their horses towards the long, grassy rides of the woodland.

"Oh! Papa and Isobel. Aren't they out early? And it's Saturday, Edward. Lovely, lovely Saturday. No lessons. I say, get your work done and we'll go out and see if we can find some baby rabbits."

"You get dressed," said Edward severely. "Baby rabbits! I've got Nanny's breakfast to do, and Miss Jeffery's, and the schoolroom breakfast. Goodness! It's a dog's life."

Matthew's well-aimed pillow caught him on the ear, and time was wasted in a joyful battle.

Every afternoon a gay expedition was planned; the children's faces were tanned to a warm apricot, their hair bleached in the sun, their small hands became hardened and scratched.

One day as they set out they came upon Miss Lintern picking pinks in the border of the kitchen garden.

"Where are you going?" she asked. "You seem to have such a good time, and you never invite me to join you."

"You can come now," said Sonia graciously, "so long as you promise not to be elder-sisterly."

Isobel joined the party. The five of them walked on; but by the time they had gone a hundred yards the children had grown tired of the sober pace and had scattered, running far ahead. Isobel and Edward, alone, walked side by side towards the cool shade of the woods. In a moment she realised with embarrassment their equivocal situation, and stopped still. Edward, who up to then had been chatting merrily, broke off and felt the colour rush to his face.

"I really can't go," said Isobel. "I forgot—I have things to do."

"Yes, Miss Lintern—I—the children——"

Her alluring face seemed to be struggling with its own demureness, its imposed conventionality; it broke into a smile.

"I should so much like to go—another time. Please understand."

"Oh, I do——"

"A pink, then; they're so gay." She pulled one from her little bunch, and the heady perfume broke on the warm air, she reached up and put it in his buttonhole. "There! Now run after those dreadful children. I'm sure you are dying to."

Confused, disturbed, he gave her one glance; then, with a hand pressed against the flower lest he should lose it, he rushed off, and without even stopping at the stile, vaulted over it. When he caught the others up Sonia said, "Where's Isobel?"

"She went back."

"What a good thing!" said Sonia.

The weeks slipped by quickly, and Edward realised that in his effort to put the past out of his mind he had surrendered too easily to the lulling atmosphere of this new life, and had forgotten a promise he had made that he would write to Rollin Burkley. Even when he acknowledged that he must write, it was difficult to make himself do so, and he kept finding excuses for himself and delaying still longer. At last, with an effort, he got out pen and paper, but found it hard to find anything to say. Of the dark things that had happened in London he was determined not to write, so there was nothing to tell Rollin except how pleasant his life had become and how happy he was in his new situation. The letter when he read it over seemed trivial, and not likely to renew the bond of friendship between himself and Rollin.

He wrote finally: "I have missed our walks together and our reading. There seems little chance of our meeting again, but I shall never stop being grateful to you for your friendship, and I would like you to know that it was—while it lasted—one of the best things in my life."

A reply came in Rollin's small, neat hand. It was a letter from which he had not been able to exclude the shade of sadness and depression that hung over him. His sister, Mrs Kinryce, had died in hospital some weeks previously, leaving him with a desperate sense of loss, for she was dear to him. Also he wrote: "The war in South Africa is over, thank God, but its last month took from me a close

friend—the junior partner in my firm, Claud Manson. He was a fine fellow, and I miss him more than I can say.”

There was a kind of sad finality about this letter which troubled Edward; he felt guilty that he had never given the war a thought, even its cessation had made no mark on the tranquillity of life at Merryns.

By now it was July and there was a house-party and much entertaining, dinners, luncheon parties, croquet parties; while everybody was talking about the end of the Eton half, when Guy would be home for the holidays. The children began it, with, “Guy will soon be home now, and when he comes——” And at meal-times Lord and Lady Cedely were always saying, “Only a few more days and then we shall have Guy home.” The servants, too, seemed to be looking forward to the arrival of this young man, and his room was opened and prepared and all his photographs and sports equipment and personal possessions arranged as he would wish to find them.

He arrived at last in a perfect blaze of welcome. No one would have thought it possible that the presence of a boy of seventeen could so affect the life of the great house, already full of people; but he was here, there, and everywhere, calmly organising and disorganising to suit his plans, as though everything existed—as perhaps it did—for his gratification. He was probably the only person on earth who could cut clean across the established order of life at Merryns with a smile and the indulgence of his parents; a tall, handsome lad, full of gay vitality, everyone’s friend, from the visitor of highest rank to the stable-boy.

He was in the nursery hugging and kissing Nanny while she wept with joy; he was in the schoolroom—“Hallo, Miss Jeffery, how are you? Still my dear old pet? Well, we won’t have any more lessons this morning because the kids are coming out with me. Anyway, the holidays have started, haven’t they? If they haven’t, they jolly well should.” And with shrieks of joy his admiring younger brothers would dash after him.

He was in the kitchen bothering the cook to leave whatever she was doing and make him some of his favourite jam turnovers—“Never mind the luncheon, let them wait.” He was in the stable ordering the grooms about, choosing the horse he wished to ride, spilling his jokes and his laughter. He was in the garden robbing the raspberry canes while the head gardener stood helplessly by with, “Not any more, Mr Guy, please! Drat the lad!” while he coolly stuffed his mouth and winked, an outrage that Lord Cedely himself would have hardly dared to perpetrate. He was on the farms, where they adored him, slapping the backs of the fine cattle, asking questions, showing off his knowledge, interfering, questioning, flinging his weight about, every inch the young heir.

He was in everybody’s way, blissfully overriding others’ plans, making work for everyone, superbly inconsiderate, terribly spoiled,

resting securely in the fact of his popularity based on affability, good looks, youthful high spirits, and his unassailable importance in the household. If anybody at Merryns didn't care for Guy, so much the worse for that person, for he was the spirit of the family, and after dinner he would sit on at the table with the men, sipping his port, and laying down the law with all the assurance of a schoolboy of seventeen who has solved the problems of the universe to his own satisfaction.

He was in the pantry.

"Hullo, Edward? You're new, aren't you? Very pleased to make your acquaintance. I say, do you play cricket?"

"I haven't played since I was a boy, sir."

"That's good enough. You've heard about our cricket match against the village? It's the biggest event of the year, and we've got to whack the blighters. I'm the captain of our side, and you look just the type of chap I want. Bung all that silver away, and come out now into the paddock and let me see how you shape."

"But, sir, I've got all my work——"

"Oh rot! I want you, and the work can go hang. I'll make it right with Mother or Mrs Dodge or whoever is the boss. The cricket match is a lot more important than a lot of knives and forks. Come on, now."

After an hour at the wicket and a tremendous lot of expert coaching, Guy expressed himself well satisfied with the kind of performance that Edward—after more coaching—would put up.

"You've got a natural aptitude," he said, "only you're too impulsive. Curb that. Their star bowler, George Woolley from the post office, has got a wicked spin and never misses an inattentive batsman. Now get over there, about a hundred yards, and I'll send you some hard catches—by Jove! you're going to be terrific in the long field."

By now Martin—also taken from his duties—and one of the gardeners were pressed into service as fielders.

"I haven't picked my team yet," said Guy. "I've got to study your form. I believe the village have a hot team and are thirsting for our blood. Young Hevon from the East Farm is captaining them again, and he's a very good all-rounder. If he gets set he'll hit out and make fifty, so we mustn't let him get set. The vicar's playing for them, and he's a stone-waller; it takes an explosion to dislodge him. But we've got Hugh Mannot this year—he was captain of cricket at Harrow, though he may be a bit rusty after all these years—and Major Collander for the wicket. . . . Martin, if I hear you muttering the word 'luncheon' again I won't have you in my team anyway!"

The gardeners were all taken from their work to prepare the pitch, and under Guy's orders they rolled and mowed unceasingly.

"When you've quite done with all the men, Guy," said Lord

Cedely plaintively as they sat at breakfast, "perhaps someone could attend to the fruit. And your mother complains that there are weeds in the borders."

"Weeds!" cried Guy on a note of scorn. "Let the girls pull out the weeds."

The family breakfasted alone on these summer mornings on the flagged terrace outside the morning-room, and Edward served them while Martin attended to the many trays that went upstairs for the guests.

Isobel came up from the garden, bareheaded, wearing a crisp white dress with broad blue satin stripes. A stiffened collar framed her face, and there was a foam of white ruffles at her elbows and the hem of her skirt.

"My dear!" cried Lady Cedely. "You haven't been out without a hat? You'll get freckled and ruin your face."

Guy jumped up. "Come on, Isobel—teach me to waltz!"

"But I want my breakfast. Don't storm about so, Guy."

"You can teach me while Edward is bringing your breakfast. I want to be a knock-out at the cricket dance." He seized her by the waist and began to make tentative steps, but she slipped away.

"Another time, though I can't imagine who is going to dance with a little schoolboy like you."

"Everyone. Miss Violet Grahame, and Lady Elsie, and Lady Cliffdown."

"Lady Cliffdown! An attractive, popular, young married woman!"

"I like the young married women the best. They're not shy and coy and simpering, like the girls, they have plenty to say, and make a man feel no end of a fellow."

"Really, Guy!" exclaimed his mother.

"Well, it's a fact. And who's your latest, Isobel? Is the faithful Hugh still kicking on the end of his string? Or is it that pompous Captain Thungummybob who was giving you burning glances all through dinner last night? He's a bit elderly; but, then, you're no longer in the first bloom of youth yourself."

Isobel's eyes darkened and flashed, but when her mother interposed to check Guy she said coolly, "I don't mind, Mamma. Guy isn't much older than Matthew, after all, and little boys will prattle."

She smiled at Edward as he removed her plate, gathering him into the intimacy of her remarks.

The cricket match took place the following Saturday. It had rained during the night, but by ten in the morning the hot sun was sparkling on the grass and the pitch was declared perfect.

"That drop of rain was what we needed," said Guy, with deep satisfaction. "Now I'll be able to skittle them out, even the vicar."

"Let me play, Guy!" Matthew begged. "Oh, Guy, please let me play this year. I'm not bad, honestly, and I've been practising all

the summer. If you'll let me play in the match I'll never want anything again as long as I live."

He had previously confided to Edward that he had been praying all night that Lord Gerald Kaye, who had gone to bed the previous evening with an attack of migraine, would still be too unwell to play.

"Well, cut along and find Lord Gerald's man," said Guy kindly, "and ask how he is. If he can't play, you can. And for goodness sake, don't look too pleased if he isn't better."

Matthew came tearing downstairs ten minutes later.

"He's no better! He's staying in bed. His man says he's in awful pain. Oh, Guy, isn't it scrumptious!"

The village team arrived, and both teams had a cold luncheon together in the pavilion. At two o'clock the umpires went out to inspect the wicket, and the house-party arrived to take their places on chairs arranged in front of the pavilion. The two captains appeared for the solemn business of tossing. Standing in the sun together, they were both impressive; Guy tall, slender, fair, looking very young and confident in his white flannels and house cap, the village captain, Will Hevon, a handsome young countryman with an athletic body and a strong, rather arrogant face.

The coin fell.

"Heads—that's us," said Guy. "We'll put you in, Hevon. I like to know what I've got to beat."

By tea-time they knew what they had to beat, for the village side had scored 110. Guy had bowled the vicar for twenty-four; and Sir Hugh Mannot was quite a hero, for he had caught Hevon in the slips—a lucky catch—after the village captain had got himself nicely set, and had already hit three fours in one over. Edward also had made a catch; and Matthew was in the seventh heaven when his elder brother gave his head a casual pat and said, "Well played, kid; you did some very pretty fielding."

Guy put in his stone-wallers—Lord Cedely and Major Prowlett—to open the House innings; and when Major Prowlett was clean bowled at his third ball and a groan went up from the pavilion, Guy himself went in, and he and his father added a lively twenty runs to the scoreboard before Lord Cedely was caught at the wicket by the vicar. Hugh Mannot came out, and he and Guy together added another twenty-five runs; then the bowler—Mr Tufton, the young vet.—bowled Guy. Martin got a duck, but Sidgely, the coachman, proved to be the star of his side, and scored thirty-three runs, one more than Guy.

Edward felt cold as his turn approached, fearing that he might let the side down with several runs still to be scored for victory, but he made a useful seven. Walking back, the party in front of the pavilion applauded him and he shyly noticed the women's admiring smiles; but all he was conscious of was that somewhere among them was Miss Lintern, and hers was the face he dared not look for.

It was given to Matthew to score the winning stroke, a moment of glory which in all his future life would never be surpassed. The score stood at 109 when he went in, and Bob Halliday was at the other end, smiling encouragingly at the twelve-year-old boy, miserably conscious that he was last man in. Bob held the bowling for the rest of the over and tried hard to make a run on the last ball so as to take it again, but failed. Matthew stood up and faced Mr Tufton, the vet., who looked to him like a giant. Whether Mr Tufton was kind or whether he accidentally did send down a loose ball did not matter; it happened, and Matthew, his young face in an agony of concentration, hit it.

"Yes!" he yelled.

They ran not one, but two. The match was won. Everybody crowded round Matthew and thumped him on the back; and the last tensed-up shred of manhood ebbing from him, he wept, and then fled in his glory and his shame.

The teams went into the pavilion for tea, where they were joined by Sonia and Barty, who would not be excluded, though Miss Jeffery insisted on being there too to chaperon Sonia, much to her disgust. There was a rustle of crisp skirts at the door, and Isobel with her friend Violet Grahame appeared.

"Mayn't we come and have tea with the heroes?"

"Oh Lord!" said Guy ungallantly, but made room. Then he held out a casual hand to Matthew. "Come along, kid. You're the champion of the match; you can sit here between me and Hevon."

After tea the village team left in their wagonette, and at night there was a dance at the house, to which many neighbours and friends were invited. Matthew, intoxicated with his honours, begged his mother to allow him to attend the dance; and though this was forbidden, as a special treat he and Sonia and Barty were allowed to sit on the stairs for an hour to watch, while Edward found time to run up to them with trays of dainties from the buffet.

The whole atmosphere of the dance was happy and informal, and Edward found himself drawn into many gay conversations.

"You did jolly well," said Lord Cedely. "I liked your style, Edward. Thank goodness, we're not having any more cricket matches, or I'd lose you permanently to Guy, and have to get another footman."

Isobel came up in her pale blue ball-dress; she had diamonds round her throat and a white rose at the side of her hair.

"You looked sweet, Edward, and we were proud of you."

"Thank you, Miss Lintern."

"Why don't you dance, Edward? Come along—dance this one with me!"

"But—oh, Miss Lintern——"

Her smile was amused, inviting.

"It's all right. I'm asking you to dance."

"I—can't—dance."

"Well, mind you learn before next year's match!"

She whirled away, and when she was gone he felt as though he had missed the most golden chance of all his life, just because he couldn't dance. He would willingly have accepted beheading next morning if for five minutes he could have touched that gauzy blue dress and held her gloved hand in his, and seen her upturned, heart-shaped face, smiling, a little below his own.

The lateness of the hour and the excitement of the day kept him awake in bed long after Martin—who had made a tremendous fuss over a bruised ankle on which a hard ball had caught him—was sleeping.

Muscles he never knew he possessed were aching. His face burned healthily from those hours in the sun. He had read for a little while, but for once the poetry seemed unsatisfying, and through it all he heard the click of ball on bat and felt again the thrill as his first clean-hit drive whizzed through the covers.

Relaxing a little, a picture of Isobel rose up unconsciously; her creamy face tilted towards him, the eyes inscrutable—who ever knew what Isobel was thinking?—and the indefinite blue haze that was her dress. Just a picture, so enchanting that it was as if he had opened his window at early morning and seen the dew on the lawn and the pink roses opening under the opalescent sky.

Guy—elegant, imperious, captivating. Matthew—weeping with the joy of attainment. Isobel . . . 'I'm asking you to dance'. With these images in his mind he fell asleep, and woke to find them still with him.

5

The August days, that went by for the family and their guests in busy idleness, were seen by Edward as a pattern of white trouser legs and straw boaters against a background of green lawns, with here and there a motif of frilled skirts tumbling out of a hammock, or hour-glass figures surmounted by huge flower-laden hats.

Happiest time of all was a series of drizzling days when the drawing-room was heavy with yawns, and Edward was commandeered by the schoolroom to make up a four at acrimonious games of Ludo and Halma, while Nanny, unperturbed at her table in the corner, cut out nightshirts from a roll of striped flannel. Thither came Guy to escape the boredom downstairs, to bring new life to the party and complicated new rules to the games; and then Isobel would appear too, with a couple of her young men, and they would all fall to playing ping-pong and blow football, or gather round the table for riotous card games while the air tingled with shrieks of "You beast! You cad! You cheat!"

"I want to be on Edward's side!" Barty cried. "He always wins."

"I want to be on Edward's side too," said Isobel coolly. "He's the

only one who plays fair, and he's much the nicest person of any of you."

I wish she wouldn't! thought Edward, as she took her seat beside him, and in the crush of the game her warm, chiffon-clad shoulder pressed against his. He knew she only said it—did it—to be provocative; to tantalise Hugh and the other fellow, to draw yet another poor chap into the circle of her radiance. They were only helpless moths, bumping about and hurting themselves in the hard white prison of her lamp.

At night, when he carried coffee to the drawing-room, she would be sitting at the grand piano in her low-cut dress, with a half-moon of crystal-strewn scarf dropping from her elbows, playing a lively waltz while half a dozen of them hung over her, to turn her music, to improvise words, to lean on the piano and make admiring remarks; and she would say, "Put it down, Edward—anywhere," as though the coffee-cup were a nuisance, and he an intruder.

The day came when Guy said, "Only three more days of the hols. But I've had a scrumptious time; I've done everything—danced, ridden, fished, shot, rabbited, ratted, played cricket. There just is not anything I haven't done."

"Really?" said Isobel. "Not *anything*?"

"Don't you be sarky, old girl."

"It sounds quite enough for one Eton boy," said his mother.

"Never mind that. This time next year I shall be looking forward to going to Cambridge, and I shall spend next summer hols growing a moustache."

"Oh!" wailed Matthew. "You won't be at Eton any more when I get there."

"And a jolly good thing too. Young brothers jolly well ought to make their own way, and not trade on their elder's reputation. I started at the bottom as a nasty little filthy fag, and so will you."

The time came for him to leave, and with his going the whole party began to break up. It was September, and even the family was separating to pay visits. Lord and Lady Cedely were going to Balmoral for a week, and from there to stay with friends, and Isobel was going back with Lady Cliffdown for a visit at Cliffdown Park.

The last carriage was packed, the coachman and groom on the box, the ladies' skirts safely folded within, the doors fastened; and Edward and Martin stood back on the steps beside Mrs Dodge, who gave the final gracious wave of farewell.

"There she goes!" said Mrs Dodge. "Another house-party gone and another summer, and she's not accepted one of them. I've lost my bet, and as for her, well—it'll be round the wood and round the wood and pick a crooked stick at last, or my name's not Alicia Dodge. Now don't look so black, Edward; I know you don't like gossip about the family; but what else have we to talk about, pray? I've known Miss Isobel since she was twelve, and even then she had

that way with men. It's nothing to do with her looks or her rank; it's something that if a woman has it she has everything, and if she hasn't it nothing else counts. It isn't a good gift either; it goes to a girl's head and makes her think that there'll always be plenty more where those came from, and all the fish in the sea just for the drawing—but it isn't always so. There'll come a time. She might even find herself on the shelf in the end."

"She might get somebody at Lady Cliffdown's," said Martin.

"Oh, I don't doubt it—but not to last, nothing serious. I know her too well by now. Look at Sir Hugh. He's the faithful sort, more's the pity, because the last kind that *she* wants is the kind that's always there, waiting to be picked up. And he's one of the biggest catches in the county, and could have anybody by lifting his finger, but for him it's got to be my lady! Life's very unfair." And Mrs Dodge lifted her wide black skirts and tripped up the steps, with a final, "Now go and clear everything up, boys, and then we'll all have a pleasant time and a nice bit of peace after all the helter-skelter. I for one am simply worn out."

Lazy days followed. Miss Jeffery, back from her holiday at Scarborough to take charge of the three children, was only too ready to ease off from lessons and sit happily in her room, writing her letters and leafing over her album of picture postcards.

"It's a long time since we went to see our fairy," said Sonia. "Let's go this afternoon, Edward."

The fairy's own particular glade was a little clearing in the woods, carpeted with fine grass and mosses under the immense columns and green canopies of the beeches.

They all sat down, shut their eyes, and waited. It was a point of honour that eyes must be kept tightly shut; no one must ever see the fairy, or he would disappear for ever. The waiting was silent, intense; it had a mystical quality born of keyed-up imagination.

"He's here!" said Matthew. "He's here— isn't he?"

"Yes, yes. Oh, fairy, may we wish?"

"He says we may."

You could believe it, Edward thought; head downbent, eyes tightly shut in the hushed deep of the wood, warm from the still, autumn weather. You could believe anything here. The children had such faith, this was more than a game.

A long pause. . . . "It's over!" cried Barty. "You can open your eyes. I wished. What did you wish, Matthew?"

"I wished that I could suddenly be old enough to go to Eton before Guy leaves."

"You won't be."

"I could. The fairy could do it. What did you wish?"

"I wished that I could play in the cricket match next summer. What did you wish, Sonia?"

"I'm not going to tell you."

"Oh, you beastly stinker! What did you wish, Edward?"

"I—I didn't wish anything. I couldn't think of anything to wish for."

"You could have wished not to be a footman."

"I like being a footman."

"You could have wished to be an explorer."

An explorer. In what dark and dangerous country? Oh no, to stay as I was; to be carefree, and free of dream-shadows.

He might even have wished to be free of her! So heart-whole had he been, so untroubled by women's attractions, that at twenty-four he did not for some time recognise his emotion as love. It was only when he could not escape from it any longer, when it was with him night and day obsessing his thoughts, when he had called it infatuation and reluctantly recognised that it was far beyond that, that he was forced to admit to himself that he loved Isobel. There could be no other name but love for the happiness he found in her presence, the liberating excitement he felt at every sight of her.

Other implications he would have preferred to ignore, but they thrust themselves upon him. The hopelessness of his position, the realisation that his unsullied delight in life was in danger of being ruined.

It was a melancholy idea. Lately he had begun to wonder why it should be that such joy in life as came to him easily and naturally should as suddenly be snatched away; that what he unconsciously feared to lose should be the very thing that fate determined to rob him of. That thing of course was his carefree pleasure, the peace of his life at Merryns. Depression growing upon him, he began to wonder if there was any aspect of life to which he could come without poisoning it. Disaster had followed him up to now. It even seemed to him that his intrusion had spoiled the life of Merryns, that he was the stone flung into the placid pool.

What was he going to do about it? One must be practical and realistic. Should he leave Merryns? Make some excuse to go away from this place where he liked everybody and life was so good, to go into a sort of spiritual wilderness? Could he bring himself to tell them—the bewildered, disappointed children—that he was bored here, that life was too uneventful, that he wanted a city job, or to be near his own people, or some such specious rubbish?

He could not do it. Suffer or bleed, he must stay here. It made no odds; he had to stay. He had to see her every day—and bear it.

Thinking it over, he found that he had had little direct contact with her, and that of her own making.

She had come one day to the pantry to ask if he could obliterate a deep scratch on her riding-boot. He wondered why she had not taken it to the groom who repaired all the harness.

While he examined the boot, her eyes roved round the room.

"Oh, you were making tea. Can I have a cup?"

He poured her one, and she leaned against the dresser sipping it. She had that day a look of marked elegance, with the glowing delicacy of her face, her poised head, the immaculate riding habit moulded to her small-boned figure.

He rubbed polish into the scratch with a clean rag.

"Let me look? . . . Oh, you're doing it beautifully, Edward. There's nothing you can't do."

Was this rank flattery, he thought, part of her skill in using men for her ends? At once he was horrified that he could at one time love her so deeply and think so cynically of her motives, perceive that she could not resist being provocative, that he himself was a man, and a personable one, and therefore good enough for an idle moment.

Perhaps Mannot—also in the net—knew her too for what she was, a clever player in the game of sensual attraction; yet nevertheless loved her, while having no illusions about her.

She had also developed the art of making conversation personal

"I'm angry with myself for taking your time."

"You needn't be. It's my working time."

"I'm keeping you from having your cup of tea. Stop and have it! Look, I'll pour it for you."

"I'd rather finish the job first."

"Do, of course, if it makes you happy." She gave him a clear, uncomplicated smile. "I suppose you are happy in your own way?"

He turned, and looking at her challengingly, said, "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing—except that if I were you I should hate to spend my life in a maze of obligations."

"But who hasn't obligations? You have obligations yourself."

"You've put your finger on the spot!" She looked down thoughtfully into her empty cup. "Do you ever want things?"

"What things?"

"That's what I wonder. You look to me the kind of man who would want things from life—huge, satisfying things. You can at least move on and try to find them. It's I who am so cramped."

He smiled. "That isn't the word I should use about your life, Miss Lintern."

"Oh, but you don't know. One can't escape from tradition, family. You wouldn't understand that. I think I was born in the wrong age. I'm the odd Lintern, the rebel. What a pity I wasn't born a younger son! They have the best time, always."

He thought, How beautiful she is! How perfectly lovely!

"I sometimes think," he said, "that we're all too much at the mercy of our own feelings."

"We'd never get anywhere if we were not!" she flashed. "I simply hate the sight of any obstacle—I suppose that's why I jump fences that in my saner moments I wouldn't consider. The thought of

being obstructed is so dreadful. Anything I really wanted I should take."

"That's dangerous."

"How do you know? Have you tried?"

"I've never wanted the kind of things you can have for the taking. You make it sound too easy, Miss Lintern."

She put her cup down abruptly. "I'm glad I came to talk to you. I think we have a lot of things in common. . . . Is my boot finished? Oh, there isn't a mark. Thank you." Her warm gaze lingered on his face, deliberately seeking his eyes. He looked away, remembering how often he had seen her look like this at other men.

It was like her to give and then withdraw, to advance and retreat.

On a November morning when hounds met on the gravel sweep before the house, she sat erect on her horse and took her stirrup cup from Edward without giving him a glance, without once taking her eyes from the ardent stare of the Master, who, mounted beside her, was engaging her in animated conversation. The casual hand came down and took the glass, and—the wine drunk—as casually handed it back, without a word, as though she took it for granted that some underling would be there to do her this service.

On occasions such as this a fury of frustration would seize him, fighting a losing struggle with his own dilemma. Then his natural determination would begin to rally again.

This mental conflict could not fail to have an effect on his outward disposition, or go unremarked.

"How quiet Edward is," said Lady Cedely to her husband. "He is easily the best footman we ever had, but I don't remember him being quite so reserved when he came here. Don't you think he has changed?"

"I haven't noticed. Perhaps you imagine things."

"No, it isn't imagination. I think I'm more sensitive to people's natures than you are, Henry. Edward never comes to chat with me; I feel I'm up against a barrier."

"Surely you're not going to worry yourself about a thing like that!" Lord Cedely laughed indulgently. "Must you be on intimate terms with every person in the house, Ethne? Soul to soul and heart to heart. You're just an Irish witch."

She was on her dignity. "You're making too much of what I say. I only mentioned that Edward has become more quiet and reserved, as though he had something on his mind. I don't want to draw anyone out against his will. The children adore him, so he must be more frank and free when he is with them."

"Oh, you merely overpower the poor fellow with your tremendous graciousness. I know what you are! Possibly Edward is a man who thinks a great deal. I know that he reads and studies, and it's very praiseworthy of him."

"Yes, but at the risk of appearing a busybody, I do like to know

what goes on in the minds of my household. Martin is quiet and reserved in many ways—heaven defend me from those hearty, familiar young men that some of my friends have to cope with!—yet he loves a little chat with me, and tells me all about his funny insects and his ambitions.”

“Oh, so Martin is ambitious?”

“Certainly. He wants to own a little country inn, and we talk about that. It does me no harm, and Martin a lot of good. I hope he gets his inn some day. I know all about Martin, and I don’t know a thing that goes on inside Edward’s handsome head.”

“You worrying, nagging, probing woman! When a young man shuts up like a clam it often means he’s in love. With all your perception, I wonder you didn’t think of that.”

Struck by the idea, Lady Cedely examined it thoughtfully.

“If he is in love, he keeps it a remarkable secret. No, of course he isn’t in love! He is too young to disguise such a thing; it is something that you can see in a man’s face, he can’t hide it—not from a woman of experience. Besides, who could he be in love with? He’s a cut above the maids.”

She persisted. She would ask, “Are you happy with us, Edward? I’ve wondered lately.”

“Of course I am, m’lady.”

“You know—you do seem to take your pleasures sadly!”

“I’m sorry if you think so. That must be just my way.”

“Is there anything you wish for? Do you get out enough?”

“Oh yes, thank you.”

“Would you like a little holiday to go and see your family?”

“I should like it at any time that’s convenient.”

“Then tell Mrs Dodge I say you are to have two or three days.”

“Thank you very much.”

He went home, though the situation at the cottage was not cheering, and from his mother he had to hear a recital of the woes that were afflicting her family: Florrie very ill in hospital; Willie drinking too much; still no news of Minnie.

When he got back to Merryns, Lord Cedely said, “You’re a bookish chap, aren’t you, Edward?”

“I’m very fond of reading, m’lord.”

“I’m afraid that’s more than I am! What kind of books do you like to read?”

“History. And biographies. And poetry.”

“I’ll be damned! All right. Can you get the books you want?”

“Not many of them.”

“Well, in future you’ll have the run of my library. Help yourself. I know you’ll look after the books.”

“Do you mean that, m’lord? I couldn’t thank you enough.”

“That’s all right. Go ahead. Anything to make you happy.”

Lord Cedely went and told his wife, "I've solved Edward. He only wanted books to read. I've given him the run of the library."

Such kindness and consideration touched Edward, but only added to his problem. He had everything—everything!—and his own mad folly.

He tried to avoid Isobel.

"Edward," she would say, "I'm bored, and it never stops raining. I'm coming up to the schoolroom to play games. Sonia says you've invented a wonderful game, much more exciting than whist."

"Yes, Miss Lintern. Sonia will be glad to show you how to play."

"But I want you to show me how to play."

"I'm sorry. I shall be too busy this afternoon."

It was easy to make excuses not to go to the schoolroom. Martin could be persuaded to take up the tea. He could plead that he was behind with the silver, or that Nanny wanted him to help her rearrange the cupboards.

It was not so easy to deceive the children.

Sonia was shrewd, and intuitive at nearly fourteen.

"Edward doesn't like Isobel," she said. "He never comes to the schoolroom when she is playing games with us."

"That's not surprising," said Miss Jeffery, who didn't like Isobel herself, and she added for Sonia's benefit the little drop of moral edification, "No young men like flirts."

Sonia passed it on. "Edward doesn't like Isobel," she said to her mother, "because she is a horrid flirt."

Lady Cedely sharply told Sonia not to talk about things unsuitable to her age, but she herself frowned deeply. She was very worried about Isobel, who was behaving in an extremely difficult way this winter, and giving her parents a lot of anxiety. The trouble was not so much Isobel's flirting as Isobel's sudden cessation of flirting, as though she had lost interest in men. She no longer bothered to make herself the centre of attraction at parties, the men could go hang; and this change of attitude did not even mean that Isobel was considering the matter of settling down seriously, for Hugh Mannot had made her a definite and very earnest proposal which she had just as definitely turned down. And it was not as if she showed preference for any other of her suitors.

"What the blazes does Isobel want?" her father asked, baffled. "Does she want to be an old maid?"

"That's what I'm afraid of," said Lady Cedely. "It can happen to a girl who begins too well, as she did. I shall certainly open the town house next season, and take her up there, much as I dislike the prospect. She must meet some new people. Perhaps the choice is too restricted here."

"She'll never meet as good a match as Mannot—and an old friend of ours too! It's ridiculous. She's spoiled. What's wrong with her, that she won't settle down?"

6

Christmas came with its wonderful festivities, its sparkling parties. Guy was home again in his inspired vitality, everybody's master and pet and blessing and bane.

He was full of plans, riding, hunting, skating—"Father, it must freeze before I go back. Can't we have a meadow flooded?"

There was a house-party for Christmas, and the inevitable tremendous urge of work. The Christmas tree. The ball. Presents for everybody.

Edward found an afternoon to take the children to Chorley, and they made a great business of secrecy in choosing their gifts. They had been saving up for weeks, and money-boxes had been opened that morning with shrill screams of delight or disappointment.

"I've got eighteen-and-six!"

"You can't have. I've only got a minging seven-and-threepence."

"That's because you would buy the white rabbit from Albert at Home Farm. You can't get many presents for seven-and-three."

"I've got to get presents for Mummy and Father and Nanny and Edward—and la Jeffery, I expect. Can't leave her out. You sblings will have to go short, that's all."

"We—what?"

"Siblings," said Matthew. "It's my new word. It means brothers and sisters."

"What a silly word! It sounds like measles."

They chose their purchases methodically, comparing prices, taking ages over details. "The glass vase for Mamma . . . the horse brass for Father . . . the handkerchiefs for Nanny . . . the sachet for la Jeffery . . . and this pipe for you, Edward. Take jolly good care of it; it cost three shillings."

"I'll never smoke any other as long as I live. It's a beautiful pipe."

"Do you really like it?" they persisted, as children do, wanting to be reassured of the recipient's delight.

It gave Edward a great deal of pleasure to spend his money on gifts for them—small things that he knew from their conversation they coveted.

January brought snow and slush, but Guy was denied his skating, for the local ponds refused to freeze. He and Isobel had their hunting, and with a gaggle of young men always about the place, Isobel seemed suddenly to become her old self, bewitching and tantalising, as though intent on capturing the pleasure of the moment.

Guy grumbled, "There! Just because the one thing I wanted was to skate, it has to be cold and wet, but never freezing."

"But, my darling," said his mother, "you have everything else."

"I'm sick of riding. I want to skate."

He would come up to the schoolroom and invent mad games

which turned into riots; tournaments, when, armed with walking-sticks, he, mounted on Matthew's back, and Barty on Sonia's, would charge and thrust at one another until half the furniture was overturned, then steeds and knights would change places.

"Oh, oh!" Miss Jeffery would cry. "What a dreadful game! Sonia, come down at once!"

"But I like it."

"Come on, Edward!" Guy would cry, in crazy high spirits. "You take up Matthew and I'll have Sonia, and they can bash the ceiling in if they want to."

This boisterous romping was an outlet for his pent-up feelings, and yet he would be wondering all the time, what would Isobel think if she were to come in and see him at such a dishevelled disadvantage?

He was too miserably conscious of trying to appear well in her eyes—as if it could matter! A look, a word, he sometimes had from her. At dinner as he served her, she would say, "Hullo, Edward? Had a good day?"—warmly, as though her interest were genuine.

He never softened to such advances.

With Guy's departure, perversely the weather changed and the longed-for frost arrived. In February the countryside was hard and ice-bound.

The children dragged Edward out to a certain pool on the estate where the reeds stood out stiffly from the solid ice, and there they all floundered about happily on skates, trying complicated figures before they could fairly keep on their feet.

"How beastly for poor Guy to miss it! I hope he's skating at Eton."

"You're awfully good, Matt," said Sonia. "You're as good as Guy."

Matthew was no longer having lessons from Miss Jeffery, but went with several other boys to a retired clergyman to be coached for his public school.

"I don't care much about skating well," he said. "All I want is to be as good a cricketer as Guy. I'm going to practise for next year's match. I want to be a bowler; if I could bowl out Will Hevon, that would be something."

"Will Hevon's the captain of the village team," said Bartholomew. "He's a terrific slogger."

"Edward knows that, silly! He was there."

"I'll tell you something else," said Sonia mysteriously. "Will Hevon's sweet on Isobel."

"Is he?" Matthew looked interested. "How do you know?"

"Oh, everybody knows that. Last year, after the match, he was glaring at her all the time, the same way as Hugh Mannot does. Feeble! And he comes to church on Sunday mornings now, though you know how difficult that is for a farmer. He only comes because we are there, and he never takes his eyes off Isobel the whole of the service."

"It sounds as if you never take your eyes off him," said Barty, giggling.

"Yes, I do! But I sit next to Isobel, and I can't help noticing."

"What a sop!" said Matthew scornfully. "Imagine, a corking cricketer like Will Hevon being sweet—"

Edward turned on him, rocked by a perfect rage of anger.

"Shut up, Matthew! You've no business to talk of such things. And Sonia must have been listening to the maids. If your mother knew——"

He did not for a moment doubt Sonia's information. She was becoming too knowing, and had been in trouble before for gossiping with the young maids, who were rarely wrong about local affairs.

"But, Edward——" The sight of his anger was something so new to them that all three were astounded. "Sonia only——"

"It's disgraceful!"

"But why?" Barty asked innocently. "Why shouldn't Will Hevon——"

Ah, why? Go on, Edward. Answer it! To your own and their satisfaction, if you can. Give the conventional answer, that the son of a tenant farmer has no business to lift his eyes to the daughter of Lord Cedely. That hits you bang in the face, just like a boomerang, doesn't it?

"Because it's bad taste," he said lamely, "and your mother wouldn't like it. Let's hurry home; it's very cold."

This episode kept him awake at night, for it had touched an exposed nerve. It did not seem unreasonable to him that Hevon should have fallen in love with Isobel. He was only one of many. He was virile and upstanding, not the type of man to keep his eyes on the ground when a beautiful woman was about, especially in the democratic atmosphere of the cricket pavilion.

Perhaps she had smiled at him, had let her gaze linger, that soft gaze of hers, so deceptively penetrating. . . . "Oh, Mr Hevon, how wonderfully you play cricket!"

And what it all came down to was, here was still another poor devil in the same trap as himself. He ought to feel sorry for Hevon. There was, in fact, an unwelcome bond between himself and this other young man of no rank or station—if by any chance Hevon was suffering as much as he was, and it seemed likely, if what Sonia had said about the church-going was true.

He found himself thinking a good deal about Hevon, and on his half-day, without really having intended it, he found himself walking across the fields towards the East Farm.

Before he arrived there he saw the man himself, setting potatoes alone in a field.

Will Hevon worked steadily, with easy strength. He wore corduroys and a blue shirt, soiled and sweat-marked, rolled up above muscular, hairy arms which had also the grace of youth. His power-

ful chest was bare to the teeth of the keen wind; he had a crop of curling dark hair, a strong, aquiline nose, and a jutting, arrogant chin. Conscious that he was being watched, he turned to see who was there; his eyes were steel grey and thickly lashed.

He muttered a casual greeting and went on with his work.

"Weather all right for you?" asked Edward.

"Could do with a drop of warm rain." Hevon straightened his back for a moment and looked again. "Didn't I see you at the cricket match?"

"Yes, I played for the House. I work there, at Merryns."

"Thought so. Having a day off?"

"Half day."

"Ah. You're better off than us farmers, I'd say."

"I don't know. Is that your farm over there?"

"My dad's the tenant."

Hevon dismissed the conversation with a nod, and went back resolutely to his work. Just as a woman can appraise the attraction of another woman from a man's angle, so Edward took in the man's sensual appeal and compelling good looks. He was no clodhopper; he was obviously intelligent and had a good opinion of himself. The kind who would take things hardly.

The thought of the havoc in this other man's life did not make Edward's own lot easier to bear. He sometimes thought that even yet he might be driven to leaving Merryns, and at such times a blind burst of rage against Isobel would shake his heart. Did she know what she was doing? Was she deliberately cruel, like a man who goes round with a gun shooting birds and leaving them wounded?

His reason told him it was not so. She was careless, thoughtless; and, herself unmoved by emotion, would give her small, derisive smile at the prospect of others too easily the prey of their feelings.

He was in no mood this afternoon to do anything but linger about the chilly fields, regretting the foolish impulse that had made him seek out Will Hevon. He wished he had planned some expedition with the children.

Some day, he told himself, the end of tension must come. Isobel herself would end it. She would marry. She would go away. He would be able to settle down at Merryns, untormented. Life would go on. He would never love again. It seemed an awful waste!

The sun withdrew behind cloud, and the wind blew more bitterly.

End it! he thought. Isobel—end it!

Lately she seemed to have lost much of her vitality, or perhaps just her restlessness. It was possible that she was taking a more settled view of life, for at the time there were two more men on the carpet, one a brother of her friend Lady Cliffdown, and the other a young portrait-painter from London, fashionable, brilliant, and well connected.

When Edward carried tea into the drawing-room she would often

be sitting curled on a sofa with a book—an unusual occupation for her—and when an hour later he came to fetch the tray she would still be there, and in the same pose.

She would lift her lashes and smile at him, in that half-intimate way. Her moments of kindness, condescension and familiarity towards him were marked; on the whole he would rather she had treated him as casually as she did the other servants.

Spring came, and it was a little summer in March, with warm, sunny days and gentle nights, a riot of bird-song and nesting, and gardeners' heads shaken ruefully because everything was coming along too quickly and there might still be frosts.

Collis, the head gardener, was a pessimist and a moaner, like others of his occupation, and when he brought in the vegetables he would say, "We'll pay for this later; you mark my words."

"Oh, get on with you, Mr Collis," said the cook "Enjoy it while it's here, that's what I say."

"It's all right for people like you, who don't know anything about it, but apple-blossom and daffodils out together never did any good, and you should see the height of the early peas! One black frost and we're done."

The maids made excuses to dally about in the sun of the stable yard, giggling and gossiping. Everyone was affected by the deliciousness of spring.

With the March moon the weather seemed still more settled, and the nights had a tranquil beauty.

Edward was given two days' leave to go home and visit his father, who was ill in bed.

Mr Boan lay fretting, full of rheumatic pain, looking out from his bed on the sunlit world of the garden and thinking of his neglected work. His mental distress was worse than his physical pain.

When he saw his son come into the room his face was transformed with joy.

"Oh, Eddie boy! This is good. Eddie, I can't tell you how glad I am to see you."

"I'm glad I came, Father; but I don't like seeing you so poorly."

The old man moved impatiently in the tumbled bed.

"I'm not so bad really, but I keep worrying about what's going to happen if I lose my health and strength."

"Don't worry, Father. You'll be all right in a day or two. It's just a chill."

"I expect it is, but you know what I am! Your mother gets so fretful too, and that worries me. Is she looking after something to eat for you?"

"Of course she is. For goodness sake, don't begin to worry about me. I'm fine."

"You look fine, Eddie. It does me good just to see you. Did she tell you about our Dolly?"

"About our Dolly? No. What's happened?"

"Oh, it's good news. She's got married."

Mrs Boan was cheerful and full of the news contained in Dolly's letter.

"She's got married, Eddie, to ever such a nice young man. In the gas business. He's quite well-to-do, and they're going to live in Glasgow. What do you think of that? Quite foreign parts, isn't it? But Dolly's going to have a proper house of her own, with seven rooms. Isn't that fine?"

He laughed. "Good for Dolly. She's going to be the rich one of the family."

Mrs Boan put down the letter, and burst into tears.

"Oh, Eddie, do you think your Dad's going to get better? If anything should happen——"

He put his arm round her shoulders.

"Don't be silly. It's only a chill; he'll be as right as rain in a day or two. Come along, Mother. Brighten up! I'm only here for two days, and I don't want any rain indoors."

She relaxed against his arm.

"Eddie, you're such a comfort to me."

He put three sovereigns into her hand.

"There—that's to spend, not to keep in the old tea-pot."

She stared at the gold. "Can you really afford it?"

"I can afford anything for you."

"Bless you, Eddie."

He left the cottage the following afternoon, and arriving late at night at Chorley station, set off to walk the three miles to Merryns.

There was a short cut through the woods which he did not know well. In the shadowed undergrowth he missed the path, and had to find his way to where through the trees he caught occasional moonlit glimpses of the roof-tops of Merryns.

The worst shocks in life come without warning, and usually in a time of profound tranquillity when the mind is off its guard.

The trees thinned out, and he found himself on the edge of a little glade.

Suddenly he saw them, almost stepped upon them, two bodies locked together on the silvered turf.

Through a gap above, the moonlight that was almost green poured down.

His intrusion was a ghastly shock, to them as well as to him. The man rolled over, hiding his face on his folded arms, but those arms, that frame, the dark curly head were easily recognisable.

The woman raised herself on her elbows, and her face was a white triangle from which stared two brilliant, secret eyes. Her dress had slipped from one shoulder, and the loose shining coil of her hair lay across it and across her breast.

There was an instant of utter silence. It was like the instant that

follows an explosion, when everything begins to crumble and disintegrate.

Edward's mind tottered, like blasted walls.

Then he was running, blindly as though hunted, bashing into tree-trunks, tearing his way through brambles, fighting the horror of the moonlit wood.

He burst out into the drive, and there was the great silent house and the ordered gardens and the terraces and the cedar trees, solemn under the cold moon.

The side door had been left open for him. Without stopping to bolt it, he rushed up to his room, where Martin lay sound asleep.

His breath tore his body in ugly-sounding gasps. He was soaked in sweat and yet shivering.

He dragged off his clothes, dropped them to lie where they fell, and flung himself face downwards across the bed.

There, hour after hour, he lay shaking; trying to blot the unspeakable Thing from his outraged mind, his face pressed down on his outflung arms, as Will Hevon's had been pressed out there in the glade.

It was half light, and Martin was shaking his shoulder.

"I say, mate. Come to!"

He stirred, and clasped his splitting head.

Martin sounded concerned and reproachful. "First time I've ever known you come home under the influence. Here, slosh your face with this." He held out a dripping sponge.

Edward seized it and pressed its chilliness against his temples.

"Go easy, old man. Look, I'll go down and pinch you a cup of tea. My! I once went on a jag myself; I know how it feels."

"I'm all right I'll get dressed."

Martin turned at the door and looked at him doubtfully.

"It's supposed to be my day off, but if you feel as bad as you look——"

"No, I'll be all right when I've washed and shaved. I'll do breakfast."

"God! You must have been mixing them."

He went down to the kitchen to spread the news that Edward had come home blotto. The cook gave a reproving cluck, and sent up a cup of tea.

Edward stared at his reflection in the looking-glass, and held the cold sponge to his throbbing eyes.

Martin, usually so silent, was curious.

"Where did this happen? I thought you were going home?"

"For God's sake, shut up!"

"All right, all right! I'm only trying to do my best for you. But you don't want his lordship asking any questions."

"I'll be all right, I tell you."

He shaved, brushed his hair, rubbed his numbed face with a rough towel. He felt stunned, as though he had been tortured in a nightmare.

In the breakfast room the silver dishes, above their spirit lamps, stood on the sideboard.

"What have you got there, Edward?"

"Grilled kidneys and bacon, m'lord."

"Good. I'm hungry. Coffee, please. Her ladyship's not so well; she's breakfasting in bed. Just a cold."

"I'm sorry, m'lord."

"And where's Isobel? It's a modern habit, this drifting in to breakfast at any time. In my day we were down on the stroke of eight, and prayers first, with the servants in. I wonder how you'd all like that? Have you got any French mustard there?"

Edward served him, and stood back against the sideboard.

Lord Cedely rustled *The Times*.

The door opened, and Isobel came in.

She looked as she always looked. Cool, fastidious, lovely. Her dress of grey woollen had a knot of emerald velvet at the throat. Her creamy cheeks were not less warm in colour. Did Edward imagine that the dark, smiling eyes were uneasy?

"Good morning, Father." She drew her skirts aside and sat down, while Edward spread the table napkin on her knee.

"Good afternoon, Isobel."

"How silly! It's only ten past nine."

"If I had ever dared to call my father silly——"

"I well believe you, but this is 1903, not 1853." Her manner was brisk, her voice strenuously normal. "What have you there, Edward?"

"Grilled bacon and kidneys, miss."

"Thank you. Just a little."

He served her plate and carried it to her. Tensely controlled as he was, he could not keep his hand steady and the thumb that was nearest to her shook. Her eyes were on it; there was the faintest shift of the muscles of her face.

She pushed her chair back with a clatter.

"Take it away. I don't want it—it looks horrible!"

The Times went down with a shoosh, and a toast-rack was overturned.

"Isobel! Must you be rude and violent?"

She drew her chair up, her hands gripped its edge.

"Bring me a cup of tea, Edward."

He poured the tea and placed the cup beside her place.

"Thank you. That will be all. You needn't wait."

He went back to the pantry in a turmoil, feeling physically ill as well as mentally shaken. Try as he would to conquer it, the malaise would not pass. His heart and mind were in chaos.

He found himself standing by the sink, his hands gripping the porcelain edge, incapable of action.

Half an hour must have gone by; he pulled himself together, and went to clear the breakfast-room. It was empty. Methodically he began to lift dishes from the littered table and carry them to the sideboard; to turn out the spirit lamps and cover the unused food.

The door opened and closed again. Isobel had come into the room. He would not look at her, he could not. Perhaps she had only left something, and would go out again, ignoring him. From the tail of his eye he saw her hesitate and stop.

"Edward, I beg your pardon for being rude."

He did not speak or turn his head.

"Edward! I'm apologising to you."

"Please don't, Miss Lintern. There's no need to."

"But I was rude and violent; my father said so. Tell me, when you served my father's plate, did you let your hand wiggle?"

"If I did, his lordship made no comment."

"But perhaps my father and you don't share a guilty secret. Do you and I share a guilty secret, Edward? I don't feel the least bit guilty, or even discomposed; but you may be one of these people who see things out of all proportion. There are such people, and the fact is I'm not anxious to have my affairs discussed from basement to attics—for obvious reasons. How do you feel about it?"

"If you're asking me not to talk about—about it, you needn't beat round the bush, Miss Lintern. I couldn't and I wouldn't."

"Well, that's reassuring."

For an instant he lost his careful control and burst out, "What do you take me for?"

"I don't know, quite honestly. I thought I knew you very well, but now I find I don't know you at all. I was so surprised last night at your behaviour. If you could have seen your own face! We listened to you galloping away through the wood: the sound of tearing branches seemed to go on for ages. I thought, There goes Edward—he can't run fast enough to let the dogs loose on us."

He was so stung that he felt the blood rush scarlet to his face.

"Is that what you thought about me?"

"What else could I think?"

"And when the 'dogs' didn't come?"

"Oh, I didn't wait. I left. I know when my luck is finished and fate turns against me. You see, I——"

He interrupted, "You don't have to explain yourself to a servant."

"That's a beastly thing to say!"

He half turned, and saw that her head was flung up and her eyes flashing. Then in a second she was gone. The door closed.

In the next few days his turmoil subsided, though his agony was no less. In cold blood he had to rearrange all his images of her. It was not even as though she respected her traditions of rank and

convention, that barrier which he had taken for granted stood between her and people like Will Hevon and himself.

And I, thought Edward, am as good a man as Hevon. If he can have her, why not I? But if he can have her, and I can have her, then she's any man's for the taking, and I don't want her. But—God!—I do, I do!

It was part of the horror that the revelation of her wantonness had not even rocked his love for her from its foundations.

It should have died by now, he thought. I should be free.

"I don't know what's the matter with you these days," Martin grumbled as they worked. "You're as moody as a sick cat. You've never been the same since that night you went on the booze."

"I didn't go on the booze."

"Search me! You were as drunk as a lord at six o'clock in the morning."

At least, he thought, she need have no fear that he wouldn't keep her secret. He had buried the sickening memory deep. Trying to rationalise it, he saw it on her part as an isolated incident arising from boredom or temporary madness.

Another shock was in store for him.

A countryman himself, he might have known that nothing is a secret in the world of the countryside where eyes are always peering. The grapevine. The bush telegraph.

The endless, prying gossip of the kitchen. This awful secret—his and hers—was no secret at all. It was common knowledge in the household. Only a complete innocent like himself could have thought it otherwise.

He came down early one morning for the tea-trays, for there were guests in the house.

The kitchenmaid was filling the little teapots from the big kettle that steamed on the hob.

Isobel's maid sat at the table sipping tea with Mrs Brain the cook. She was a thin, neurotic, sentimental girl called Grace Chirk, from the village; daughter of a choirman.

"She's been at it again," Mrs Brain said, warming her hands closely round her cup. "It's the French window in the little study that she uses. Ada sees her footmarks in the morning."

"She had on her dark dress for dinner last night," said Bella the parlourmaid, who supplied for whichever footman was off duty. She had the greedy eyes of the chronic gossip. "Whenever she has her dark dress on I know what she's after. Mind you, if it wasn't for him being no class, they'd make a handsome couple."

"Handsome? You call her handsome, with a face the shape of a Jew's harp?" said the kitchenmaid shrilly.

"If she was my girl I'd put her acrost my knee," said Mrs Brain. "Forgetting her station like that! I call it indecent."

"My! If her pa and ma was to know!"

"They'd be the last to know. The thing about being a lord and lady is that you're so taken up with being a lord and lady that you never notice common things that are going on under your eyes. You're above them, so to speak. You think your daughters aren't like common folks' daughters; they don't have the same feelings and instinks; they're gentry same as you, see?"

"Law, Mrs Brain!"

"None of you know anything about it," said Grace Chirk, going pink. "And I do. I know *her*, and I tell you, it's the real thing. They love each other. She's to be pitied, poor girl, if she can't have the one she loves except on the sly."

"You surprise me, Miss Chirk. The very idea! If she was a poor servant girl there'd be another name for her game. I tell you, I'm shocked. Love indeed! Her, and a common farmer."

"I'd go further," said Grace Chirk. "If I'd any say I'd let them get married. My brother says that this class business is going out of date."

There was a hearty chorus of protest.

"*Married!* My word, Miss Chirk, anybody 'ud think you were one of these Radicals, to hear you talk. If his lordship heard your sentiments you'd get the sack quick."

"Can't you hurry with that tea?" said Edward, goaded beyond bearing.

"Listen to his royal highness! Anybody would think——"

7

There was a softness about her now. A far-away look, dreamy and serene. a slumbrous, satisfied look. Like a cat that is getting cream and chicken.

So it was still going on. The dark dress, the study window; the flitting through the night, the hungry embrace, the profound gratification. They were lovers. She loved, and all her nature was fiercely keyed up to the dominance of passion.

At dinner, Edward found himself night after night looking for the dark dress, stung by the knowledge that Bella, the parlourmaid, was looking for it too, with her smouldering, avid glances.

On such nights as it was worn he would lie awake for hours, rigid, not only suffering for himself but smelling ultimate catastrophe, feeling a knot of fear tighten in his stomach and shoot darts of ice along his nerves.

Fear for her. Fear of the inevitable end to such a course as she was taking. All this for her sake—as though she cared!

Whatever came of it need not affect him. And he had little cause to love her and great cause to despise her, for slaying his dream.

Guy came home early in April, to recuperate after an ear infection that had made him ill. He seemed little the worse, and his malaise soon vanished in the excitement of being at home. The very first

morning after his return he was out early, calling for the gardeners to mow and roll his cricket pitch; and in the afternoon he had them all out there—his brothers, and as many men as he could muster—giving them bowling instruction.

"You always know when Guy is home," said his father. "Our life is disrupted for this cricket."

Edward left the game early to go to the house to prepare tea.

Turning the corner of the yew hedge into a grassy alley he came upon Isobel. She was sitting on a seat, secluded, writing materials on her knee.

She looked up.

"Oh Edward——"

He had to stop.

"This is lucky. Will you do something for me?"

"What kind of a thing?"

She looked at him thoughtfully. "Are you friend—or enemy?"

"Not enemy."

She nodded, understanding perfectly.

"I thought you might be going into Chorley tomorrow. You usually do on Wednesdays. Will you deliver a letter for me?"

"A letter—in Chorley?"

She let her gaze rest on his face, her lips curved.

"Please. It's ready—here."

She handed the envelope to him. He glanced at the address . . .

"Mr Will Hevon, at the corn shop next to the saddler's in Market Lane, Chorley."

A meeting postponed or deferred, perhaps. He had half expected this, but she did not fail to notice the slight start he gave, the instant control of his expression beyond a sudden tightening of the lips.

"I wasn't intending to go into Chorley."

"But you will? You'll do this for me—please, Edward!"

"Of course, if you ask me to."

On rainy, wild nights she had sometimes worn the dark dress. They must have some meeting-place, some arranged shelter.

"It's awkward," she said. "No one would understand but you—I mean, that I'm in love."

"Are you asking me to comment on that?"

She looked for a moment as though she was going to weep.

"I have to have you for an ally. I've only you—and Chirk. You see, you *are* in it with me."

"Yes, I suppose I'm in it."

She brightened instantly. "Oh, you are a darling!" she cried. "I knew I could trust you. You don't know what it means to me. I'm terribly happy."

Yes, he thought, you are. And now I am caught up by you and made your messenger, your instrument, and you are using me. You'll go on using me; and when the end comes I am involved, and

I am to be discarded. It seemed to him that they were both caught in some intricate pattern of life; drawn together as now, and then separated, a pattern in which he could find no joy or satisfaction, but from which he would never be able to escape.

His instincts rebelled against his emotions, but he was powerless. Apart from her he had no existence.

Next day he went to Chorley, and, finding the corn shop, handed the letter to the man behind the counter. He glanced at the inscription without interest, and slipped the letter under the counter.

"All right."

It was an understood thing, then; probably of Hevon's arranging.

To Edward was left the misery of imagination. Isobel did not even ask him if he had delivered the letter. She was as confident of him as that.

Meanwhile he wondered how much the household knew. Were they still talking about her in the way that made him sick to hear? They had seen how he disapproved. Now, when on one or two occasions he entered the kitchen, there fell too sudden a silence; too marked a change of topic would awkwardly follow.

It was all suspicion, speculation; and somehow the normality of the life that went on in the house made it worse; Guy with his sporting enthusiasms, the children absorbed in their games and hobbies, Lady Cedely delighting in the signs of spring in the gardens, the smooth running of the great establishment.

The end came, as such events do, in a way that stunned him. It was the Tuesday before Easter, and a party of guests had arrived to stay over the week-end.

At about three o'clock in the afternoon Edward was checking the silver after a luncheon party when Isobel came to the pantry. He could see at the first glance that she was tremendously excited, very pale and tense.

"Edward, will you please make me a cup of tea?"

"Is Miss Chirk not about? Shall I find her for you?"

"I don't want Chirk. I want you to make it."

He lighted the spirit lamp, set the silver kettle upon it, found a small teapot and a cup and saucer. Isobel stood with her hands pressed together, watching the flame.

The kettle boiled. He made the tea.

"Do you want me to carry this upstairs for you, Miss Lintern?"

She gave an excited gasp. "No, pour it, please. I want to drink it here. Oh, Edward, I have to talk to you very seriously. Please stop what you're doing and listen. Am I right in thinking that there's nothing you wouldn't do for me?"

He put down the teapot.

"What is it you want?"

"Oh, don't sound as if you suspected me. I can't bear it. I've got so much faith in you. And I need it!" She drank the tea as though

she was very thirsty. Edward began to arrange forks in a baize-lined drawer.

"Please, please stop!" Her voice was so urgent that he had to give her his whole attention. "It isn't necessary to pretend. It's just that—we can't go on like this any longer. We're going away."

For an instant he was quite bewildered, and didn't realise what she was talking about.

She misunderstood the look on his face, and said petulantly, "So you still have that attitude? You do what I ask you grudgingly, and you think, 'Oh, the wicked girl! She has a lover, and what a dreadful thing if anybody knew.' That's what you think. You don't believe that I'm really in love and that nothing else in the world matters but getting the one I love. It's quite simple to me, and I thought you would have understood. But you're oppressed by the idea of the family, and outside things like that which don't really mean anything at all. I'm the one who matters!"

He said, "You mustn't talk like that. I didn't mean that at all. It was only that I didn't understand quite what you were talking about. I understand now. You haven't told me what you want me to do."

"I'm sorry." Her face was both serious and pleading. "But I'm so worked up. I'm only asking a simple thing of you, but it makes all the difference if you really intend to help me, and I think you do. You do, don't you, Edward?"

"There aren't many things I wouldn't do for you," he admitted, not without mental reluctance that he was putting himself so completely into her hands.

"That's sweet of you. Well, first I'm going to give myself away entirely, so you can ruin everything if you want to. I've planned to go away with him tonight——"

"Oh——"

"Wait. We're going to get married. You know—don't you?—that he's the one I really want?"

"So you say."

"Oh, you shouldn't be cynical. Please!"

"I didn't mean to be. It isn't my business. I suppose you know what you're doing." He was talking to disguise his shock.

"I know what I'm doing. We both know. We're not children, though I've been treated like a child too long. I'm twenty-four, and for years they've tried to order my emotions. That hasn't paid. Yes, I know what I'm doing, and I know the consequences, and it doesn't make any difference to me. This is my plan. Are you listening?"

"Of course."

"Before tea I'm going to slip away and walk across the fields to Medlett. There's a carrier who goes from there at five o'clock to Oswestry station. Will is going to join me there to catch the eight o'clock train. Chirk is going to make things easy for me. She'll give

it out that I have a cold and don't want to be disturbed tonight. This is what I'm asking you to do, Edward. About six o'clock is a quiet time upstairs, nobody is about. Go up to my room then, and Chirk will give you a trunk packed with my clothes. I'm not quite so young and silly as to run away with what I stand up in." She smiled, and gained confidence. "Carry the trunk to the lane behind the kitchen garden, where you'll find Chirk's brother waiting with a horse and trap. He's going to take care of it for me until I can send him an address. That's all."

She put down her empty cup, and suddenly her hand trembled and it overturned in the saucer.

There was a moment's silence. She kept her eyes on Edward's face.

"All right," he said. "I'll do that."

Relief glowed in her eyes.

"Oh, thank you! I knew you would. I knew everything would be all right." She stopped. There was nothing left now but to make her retreat, and this was awkward.

She said, "Big decisions have to be made all in a moment. I suppose it seems stupendous to you. It did to me, till I got used to the idea. Now it doesn't seem a dreadful thing at all, but quite natural. I suppose you think I ought to have done this openly?"

"I don't see how you could."

"No, I couldn't. That's just it. It isn't that I'm a coward either; I can face indignation and rows, but not fuss. I think when a thing like this has to be done it's up to the person who does it to give as little trouble as possible to other people. I always did believe in presenting people with a *fait accompli*. In my kind of world," she went on with a touch of bitterness, "it isn't usual for a girl to organise her own life. You let the thing you want go by, and go on living in an awful, frustrated way. I couldn't bear it. Do you realise, Edward, there isn't a single person in this house I could talk to like this, except you?"

"I don't know that you ought to talk to me like this," he said gently.

"It's just that you're my kind of person." She turned the knife, unconsciously rending him. "For instance, if I had fallen in love with you, it would have been just the same."

"That's an impossible idea."

She withdrew her eyes, her expression changed. She said, "It seems funny to think that I shan't be seeing you again. I haven't any illusions about what's going to happen here when this comes out. I only hope the poor old Hevons don't get kicked off their farm; they will disapprove quite as much as my parents will, but I don't really think my father has it in him to be such a vindictive beast. Besides, Will and I shall be far away. It's good-bye, Edward. And thank you. I do thank you very much, I do really."

"Good-bye, Miss Lintern," he said.

She slid her hand into his, but he barely felt it. When she was almost out of the door he called out.

"Isobel!" He wasn't aware that he had used her name.

She looked back. "Yes?"

"I only wanted to say I hope you'll—I mean, good luck."

"That's sweet of you. Of course we'll meet again. Good-bye!"

She was gone. It had been like a dream, and he had had so many bad ones recently that he still couldn't grasp reality. But she was gone, and he might never see her again. That was reality.

He wondered what was going to happen tonight or tomorrow morning when it all came out. For his part in it he would naturally get the sack. To all his foolishness he had added this final mad act of lending himself to her scheming. He was the fool! To lose his job and his reputation in order to make it easy for his girl to go off with her lover.

He was still standing there an hour later when Martin came in.

"Crikey! Haven't you finished yet? You'll have to help me with tea, there are sixteen in the drawing-room."

"You can do it yourself. I haven't been off my feet yet since luncheon."

The tone and the words were so unusual that Martin stared.

"What's biting you, mate?"

"I have to do the upstairs teas, in any case."

"All right, all right, if that's the way you feel."

He carried up the schoolroom tea. There was an unusual hush there, the two children sitting sulkily at the table with their maps open.

Miss Jeffery herself was sitting beside the window with a book, rigid disapproval in every line of her.

"We have been inattentive," she said. "We are doing detention."

"It isn't fair," Bartholomew broke out. "Guy's waiting for us——"

"Be quiet, Barty. Every time you speak there will be another five minutes detention."

"Shall I bring you your tea here, Miss Jeffery?"

"Please, Edward. And the children may take theirs while they work, though they don't deserve any cake."

Sonia caught Edward's eye, with a grave wink. He forced a smile, to please her.

"Edward, Guy wants us all on the pitch *directly* after tea," Barty broke out, unable to contain himself.

"I'm sorry. I've got too much to do. There are visitors."

"Barty! An extra five minutes for you."

"Oh hell! Why can't I go to a tutor with Matthew?"

"And I shall report you to your father for *filthy, disgusting language!*"

Edward went back to the pantry for Nanny's tea. She was sewing,

as usual, in the nursery. It seemed impossible that all this normal life could be going on.

Free at last of duty, he went to his room and sat on the edge of his bed, elbows on knees, his fists pressed to his temples. He could hear the wood-pigeons outside, cooing their monotonous call. It was a grey afternoon, and would be early dark. His watch said half-past five. She would be in the carrier's conveyance now, on the way to the station.

He took up, breathing like a man who has run too far and too hard.

He went down to the pantry and stood there, aimlessly, his eyes on his watch.

Martin came in, staggering under a loaded tray

"I say, if you haven't anything else to do you might help me. I've been stuck in the drawing-room for an hour, slaving. It's hardly fair."

"I'll wash those, before I go up for the empty trays."

"Thanks!" said Martin shortly. "Don't hurt yourself, will you!"

He washed the delicate cups and saucers; then it was time to go up to Nanny's room to fetch her tray.

"You're later than usual," she said.

"There are a lot of people for tea in the drawing-room."

"And I suppose you've been talking about this awful thing that's happened. Ada has just been up to tell me."

"What awful thing?" he rapped out. For a moment he thought everything had been discovered.

She looked at him in sharp surprise.

"Why, the accident. That poor young man—young Hevon from the East Farm. He was gored by the bull this afternoon. Horrible, dangerous creatures, bulls."

"I didn't know—I hadn't heard anything——"

"You sounded so upset. I thought—well, it's all very sad, isn't it? His lordship will be distressed."

He caught up the tray and almost ran with it to the pantry. He slapped it down, caught a glimpse of his own white, startled face in the mirror behind the door. He went down to the servants' hall. They were all sitting round the table, all talking at once. The air seemed to be clanging with sensation.

He said, "What's this about Hevon?"

All the excited faces turned to him. "Haven't you heard? . . . Oh, it's awful . . . makes you sick——"

"Is he badly hurt?"

"Hurt! He's dead. Killed him outright in his stall, the brute. There was nobody else on the place except the young lad of fourteen, and he had to run to the next farm for help. It was twenty minutes before they could get him out of the shippin. They say there was nothing left of his face."

The kitchenmaid screamed and went off in a faint.

"Stupid woman!" said Mr Collis the gardener. "Well, I've always said you can't be careless with a bull. He's your natural enemy and he'll just wait his chance. I've seen it happen so often. The young lad said that Will had been in a tearing hurry all day, rushing on the milking and the feeding. He'd just fetched the bull in, and he hadn't even tied him."

"Isn't it horrible? That handsome young chap! What'll happen when——"

Edward rushed upstairs, through the empty corridors, past the closed bedroom doors, to Isobel's room. He went in without knocking. Grace Chirk was standing in the middle of the floor; her silly face was milk-pale, her mouth hung open.

"You've heard?" he said.

"Oh yes. Oh, what are we going to do?"

"I've got to get to Oswestry and find her. Unpack that trunk and put the things away. Do you say your brother has a horse and trap?"

"Yes. He'll be in the lane. It's a good horse and trap."

"Well, for God's sake stop crying and come with me. Tell your brother he must take me, and then fetch us back here. You mustn't let anyone into this room. Say she's ill and can't be disturbed."

"I've said that already."

They slipped down the back stairs and out of the side door. It was dusk already, and raining. They ran across the shrubbery and up the side of the walled garden to the lane. A man was waiting.

"Alfred," said Grace Chirk, "you've got to take Edward to Oswestry, as quick as you can."

"To Oswestry? What about the trunk?"

"There's no trunk. Don't waste time talking."

"It'll take three hours or more, there and back. I don't want to go so far."

"I'll give you ten shillings," Edward said.

"Oh, all right."

The horse was a good one, but the journey seemed endless and the pace slowed as darkness fell. Edward would not talk, and cut off every attempt of Alfred Chirk at conversation.

"Heard about young Hevon?"

"Yes."

"Damned fool. You can't afford to make a slip with a bull. Too merry-careless these chaps get. Same thing happened only last year to——"

"There's another crossroads. For God's sake don't take the wrong turning or we'll lose time."

It was five minutes to eight when they got to Oswestry. The station was very dark, lightened only by a couple of oil lamps. A single porter stood about waiting, for the train was nearly due.

Edward sprang out of the trap and ran along the platform to the

waiting-room. She was sitting there, huddled in a corner, her figure tense with anxiety. When he went in, by the dim light of the lamp she saw only the tall figure of a hurrying man, and jumped up eagerly.

"Oh Will! I thought you were never coming. The train——"

"It's me. Edward."

She took a step back, fright and conjecture in her face.

"What's happened? Why——"

"Isobel," he said urgently, "you'll have to come back with me. Now, at once. I've got a trap waiting. Please take this quietly! Please, I beg you. There's been an accident."

"Who to?"

"To Hevon, I'm afraid "

Her body began to shake.

"Tell me!"

"He's been hurt by a bull."

"Oh no! How badly?"

"I'm afraid—he's dead "

He was expecting her to fall. As she swayed he caught her and put her down on the wooden seat that ran round the walls of the waiting-room. He held her with his right arm; with the left he pressed her head down. Presently she came out of the faint and began to shudder. She turned her face into his chest, and her hands clawed and scraped at his coat.

"Isobel, you've got to come now. Please try. Leave everything to me; I'll help you "

She was moaning. He half carried, half dragged her to the trap. With the help of Alfred Chirk, gaping with curiosity, he got her in.

They began the long, slow drive home through the darkness. For an hour she lay half conscious against his shoulder; then she stirred and began to smooth her hands over her cheeks. She was wearing a long, thick coat, buttoned from neck to hem, and a small hat tied on with a grey chiffon scarf.

"You've got to be brave," he said. "Brave and quiet. I know you can! You've got to get home before anyone finds out you're missing; don't you see how necessary that is? There mustn't be any questions to answer."

"Yes," she said, very low.

"You can do it. You'll feel stronger in a minute. Once you're in your own room you can give way. Chirk's there, waiting to look after you. I had to do it like this. Please be strong, for an hour or two!"

"Yes." Her voice was a little more steady.

"Brave girl!"

Her vice-like grip on his arm was painful, but he kept quite still, letting her fight her battle. After a little while he felt her give a convulsive movement; she sat up.

"I'll be all right," she said.

"It won't be long." He said to the driver, "Go as quickly as you can, please."

"I'm doing my best. The horse is tired, and no wonder," he growled.

"Edward, it is true, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's true."

"Oh God, but it can't be—it can't. What happened?"

"Don't ask me now. Please don't. Don't talk about it. Try not to think."

"I shall go mad."

"Hang on to my arm—that's right."

"I haven't got my dressing-case!"

"It's here. I have it safe."

"Does *anybody* know—about me?"

"Of course not. No one can possibly know. We shall be home in time. Chirk has told everybody you have a cold and don't want to be disturbed tonight."

She shuddered. "When you feel like this—it's a wonder you don't die. I think I want to be sick."

Edward motioned to the driver, who stopped the trap. He helped Isobel out on to the grass verge and held her while she was violently sick. The drenching rain poured down on them, the darkness was cold.

"Oh God . . . oh God!" she sobbed.

She was shivering so much that he took off his coat and wrapped it round her before lifting her back into the trap. She slipped into a kind of half-consciousness, leaning against him heavily.

It was ten o'clock when they stopped in the lane outside Merryns.

"Can I help?" said the man Chirk, ashamed of his surliness.

"We've got to get her to the side door. I can carry her up the stairs myself."

He prayed as he had never prayed in his life that he would meet no one as he carried her through the house and up to her room.

His prayer was answered. He tapped on her door, and Grace Chirk, who had been standing just inside it trembling for a long time, opened it at once and took Isobel in.

8

Isobel stayed in her room for a week. It was given out that her cold had turned to severe influenza, and the doctor who came each day confirmed that she was very ill. Edward himself carried up her trays and left them on the dumb waiter outside her door, but all the week the food was left untouched and only the tea taken.

During that Easter week it seemed to Edward that nobody in the house could talk about anything but the fatal accident which had

crashed into the brightness of early summer. In the kitchen they never tired of turning over the brutal details, nibbling, swallowing the story in great gulps. At least, Isobel was not about, to be devoured by sly, speculative stares.

Lord and Lady Cedely went themselves to pay a visit of condolence to Will's parents, who had lost their only son, and carried a great sheaf of flowers from the hothouses for Mrs Hevon.

The children talked incessantly about the tragedy, fascinated—as children are—by death and disaster.

"Edward, Mr Collis says that the boy at the farm says that Will Hevon fetched the bull out of the field, he was dragging it by the pole and its eyes were flashing, and he put it into the stall, and never even tied it. It was bellowing, he went to get its feed, and——"

"Don't keep talking about it. We all know."

"But everybody's talking about it. Mr Collis says——"

"I don't want to hear what Mr Collis says."

"Oh, Edward, you are a mean thing!"

"Well, it's all over and done with, isn't it?"

Bartholomew looked at him with large, reproving eyes.

"Yes, but Will Hevon! He won't play cricket any more. Mr Collis says that when a bull is going to kill you, it stamps and puts its head down, and——"

"It's the horns," said Guy. "They can tear a man to ribbons. I don't know who the village will get for the team now. He was a corking good cricketer."

"What will they do with the bull, Edward? Edward! What will they do with the bull?"

"I don't know."

"Will they shoot it?"

"I don't know."

"I shouldn't think the Hevons will want to have it around," said Matthew.

"It's my father's bull, after all," said Guy. "It's a very fine animal, worth a lot of money."

"Well, what will they do with it?"

"Sell it, I should think."

"Who to?"

"How should I know who to? What does it matter?"

"Edward, who will they sell it to?"

"Oh, be quiet, Barty!"

Thank God, he thought, she was safely out of this kind of discussion. It would be a nine-days' wonder. It must die down before she appeared among them again.

He admired Grace Chirk for her loyalty and silence. When curious tongues wagged in the servants' hall and questions were asked: "How's Miss Isobel? . . . Has she really got the influenza, or . . . Has she ever mentioned *her*—you know! . . . What did she

say when they told her . . ." there was only a calm toss of the head and a firm, "Don't be silly! You and your gossip!"

On the eighth day, when he took up Isobel's tea, Grace Chirk came out of the room and said, "You're to come in. She wants to see you."

Isobel was sitting in a chair by the window, looking out on the lawn, where Guy was throwing up a ball in the sunshine. She was not as changed, as ravaged, as he had expected to find her. At twenty-four the looks of youth can resist a good deal of grief, and it was only in her eyes that the real depth of horror lay. Their darkness had a burned-out look.

"Come in, Edward," she said. "You can go, Chirk."

She pointed to a chair and Edward sat down.

"I don't know what you must think of me," she said, "for not thanking you. I never thanked you that night. When I had time to think properly I realised what you had done for me."

"Don't thank me," he said. "It seemed to me at the time the only thing to do. I admired you for being so brave, the way you took it."

"As far as I remember, I was far from brave," she said dryly. "I was sick all over you. The whole thing is too horrible to remember. They've buried him, haven't they?"

"Yes."

"Father came himself and broke the sad news to me, in a way fitting for the ears of an invalid. 'That nice young Hevon from East Farm! I know you'll be sorry, Isobel.' And I said how sorry I was, and sent my sympathy to Mrs Hevon. You see, when I start controlling myself I hardly know where to stop. When I think what you saved me from! A nice fool I should have looked, waiting on Oswestry station all night for a dead man."

"Talk it all out to me," he said. "Talk as bitterly as you like. I understand."

"You're certainly the only one I can talk to. What a story it would have made for the neighbourhood! But thanks to you I was spared that. Chirk has told me that all the servants knew about me and Will. I might have guessed. Nothing's a secret in this horrible place. How I shall hate their staring faces! And I shall suffocate in this house. There isn't anything to go on living for."

"You had things to make you happy—before."

"As if I could begin that kind of life all over again!"

"When you feel stronger," he said, "it won't seem so bad."

"When I'm stronger I shall make every effort to get away from home. I'll go anywhere, I'll do anything! I can't stay here."

"I wish I could help you."

"You've done enough for me, Edward. I'm not worth it. I'm not worth anybody's money now."

The very act of unrestrained talking, feverish though it sounded, had done her good and brought animation to her face and colour to her cheeks.

"I've got to go down and face them," she said. "I may as well do it now, while you're near to give me moral courage."

She threw off the rug that was on her knee. "I feel better already without this thing. I hate being dressed up as a sufferer."

"Are you sure you're well enough?" he asked.

"In the sense you mean, I've been well enough for days."

"Don't do anything hasty," he said. "Don't do anything you'll be sorry for. You're just in the mood."

"Darling Edward, you sound ninety. I know what I am, and I know what I need." She stood up, and touched her hands to her hair as if the weight and luxuriance of it were a burden.

"Go down and prepare the way," she said. "Tell them to kill the fatted calf—oh, but that isn't very apposite, is it? I'm the unsuspected prodigal. I sometimes think I should like to re-write that story and make them kill the prodigal instead of the poor calf."

She came down about ten minutes later.

Lord Cedely cried, "Why, Isobel! This is nice; but are you sure you're well enough? Come over by the fire."

"I'm quite a fraud," she said. "I'm perfectly well. There's nothing worse than sitting in one's room, waiting for the end."

"They'll all be so pleased," he said. "Hugh Mannot is here; he's been for a ride with Guy, and I've just told him that you have influenza and he won't be able to see you. He was so disappointed."

She walked over to the open French window and looked out. Her long scarf trailed behind her on the carpet.

"Think what a pleasure for him to be un-disappointed."

"Have you had tea?"

"I can't remember—I think so. Oh yes, Edward brought it up. But do have yours."

Lady Cedely came in. "Oh, Isobel, you're down. Is that wise?"

"I'm quite well, Mother. Don't fuss."

"Well, it is a nice day, and quite warm really. Sit close to the fire, darling."

"Mother, if you fuss I shall go and sit in the garden. I feel like going for a ride!"

"I shan't allow you to do anything of the kind, not until Doctor Williams sees you. Influenza is so treacherous. The after-effects."

Edward began to pass round tea.

"Edward, you haven't given Miss Isobel any tea."

"I've had tea upstairs, Mother. How many more times do I have to say it?"

"Isobel's touchy," said Lord Cedely. "People are always touchy after influenza."

"If anybody mentions my symptoms again I shall scream!"

Her eyes and Edward's met, but in hers he could see no reality, no truth; only a hard, bright stare. He knew then that in her efforts against self-betrayal she would arrive at the final falsity, towards herself.

"I beg your pardon, Father," she said, "I'm being quite intolerable."

Guy came loping across the broad lawns, bareheaded, followed closely by Hugh Mannot. He burst in at the French window, bringing a cool gust of fresh air and a slight smell of horses.

"Father, we came back through the village, and——"

"Guy," said his mother reproachfully, "wouldn't it be polite to notice that Isobel is downstairs?"

"I didn't notice. Sorry!" He grinned at his sister. "Hullo, corpse! Reviving?"

"Come in, Hugh," said Lady Cedely. "Did you enjoy your ride? You're just in time for tea. Take that chair beside Isobel."

Mannot's delighted gaze had already found Isobel.

"You're down! I never thought I'd have the luck to see you. Are you really better? Influenza is the most beastly thing."

"I'm quite all right. I'll even consider having a ride with you tomorrow."

"You'll do no such thing!" her mother interposed. "Don't let her be so reckless with her health, Hugh."

"I wish I had the right to stop her," he said, meaningfully.

Isobel's colour heightened. "Guy, pass the cake to Hugh."

"Nothing to eat, thank you. Just a cup of tea."

"I was telling you, Father," Guy said, "that we rode back through the village and stopped to talk to Tufton. The village doesn't want to play the match this year. They haven't found anyone to replace Hevon, and the vicar says it would be more respectful to his memory to let the thing slide this year. I don't know what to think."

"I think it's absurd!" said Isobel, with almost passionate vehemence. "How he would laugh at such an idea."

Guy looked taken back, and Mannot said, "Oh, I don't know, Isobel. Looks a bit heartless, you know, carrying on as if the poor chap had never existed."

"We'll have to get a substitute team from somewhere to play us," said Guy. "There's plenty of time. Do you think we should, Father, or will you persuade the village to play?"

"I think I should respect their feelings and have a different opponent this year."

Mannot was looking at some stereoscopic views that he had picked up. The set belonged to Matthew. The double picture was placed in a frame, and slid along a rod towards the velvet-lined eye-pieces. When it was in position it became three-dimensional.

"I'll put the pictures into the frame for you," Isobel said suddenly. "Then you don't have to keep taking it away from your eyes. There . . . Venice . . . here's another——"

Her unexpected graciousness took him by surprise, and his pleasure was obvious.

A week later she accepted him.

Lady Cedely was delirious with happiness, and her husband said, "There! Knew the girl had good sense, Ethne. Knew it all the time. She only wanted to have her head for a little while."

A hundred guests came to a brilliant engagement party, and the following night there was a celebration in the servants' hall, to which Isobel and Mannot went down.

Mrs Dodge rose from her place at the table to greet them, and with a dignified bow said the speech she had been memorising all day. "On behalf of the staff of Merryns, Miss Lintern, I should like to offer you our sincere congratulations upon your engagement, coupled with a respectful and devoted wish for your happiness, and the same to Sir Hugh, if I may be so bold."

Isobel, looking very composed in her dress of amber satin, with Mannot's gift of a diamond-and-emerald necklace round her throat to match the glittering new ring she wore, said with appealing informality, "Thank you all very much, Mrs Dodge. I appreciate your good wishes, and you do too, don't you, Hugh? I can't make nearly such a nice speech as you have made, but I do hope you'll all enjoy your dinner, and Father says you are to have anything you wish to drink my health."

They gave her three cheers, and she smiled without a trace of embarrassment; it was Mannot who blushed, and murmured, "I can't do this kind of thing gracefully."

During the weeks that preceded the wedding Edward never again saw her alone. It was clear that she was avoiding him, and that gave him no surprise after her final act of face-saving. Only when she was forced to meet his eyes did he sometimes glimpse in her face that expression of mingled tenderness and solicitude which is the apology for withdrawal of confidence.

Chapter 5

I

"You would think that Hugh and Isobel would always be in and out," said Lady Cedely, "but really, for all we see of them they might live fifty miles away."

She said this frequently, at first in an aggrieved tone, then with a little more satisfaction adding—to intimate friends, "Not that Isobel is being idle, and if—as we hope—she presents dear Hugh with an heir inside the twelve months no one is going to complain."

Isobel gave her husband a son and heir the following August, and came to Merryns for a month's visit, bringing the baby and two nurses. Lord and Lady Cedely were delighted with their grandchild, and old Nanny was in ecstasies, though she hated the nurses who would hardly allow her near the baby.

She appealed to Isobel, who said, "You must fight it out between you. I don't give any orders in the nursery. I've done my duty by the Mannots; and quite honestly, Nanny, I can't see much attraction in a small baby, so please don't harass me."

Isobel after marriage, as Isobel before marriage, was still being something of a worry to her parents. She appeared to be apathetic and bored, though Lady Cedely insisted that this was only a symptom of her convalescence, for childbirth in the upper classes in 1904 was regarded as a complicated disease requiring long recuperation.

Sir Hugh, who proved to be as doting a father as he was an adoring husband, rode over twice a week. After he had left on one of these occasions Isobel's spirits brightened considerably, and she announced, "Hugh has taken a house in Town for me—in Grosvenor Square. We shall move there before Christmas. The baby and the nurses will be all right at Chorley Beeches; the country is so much better for a child."

"You don't mean," said Lady Cedely, "that you intend to make a long stay in London? I thought you didn't like it."

"Oh, Mother! I must have a little life. Can't a person change her ideas? I'm not a young girl any more to be satisfied with croquet or riding or going to dreary dinners with the same neighbours." She added, "Why should you fuss and argue about me? I'm well able to look after myself. Soon you'll have Sonia to bring out, and I'm sure she'll prove a much more satisfactory daughter than I ever was. She's grown out of her tomboy ways already; and she's going to be beautifully true to type!"

The Mannots moved into their town house, and the baby and his nurses went back to Chorley Beeches, where Lady Cedely paid him an occasional anxious, grandmotherly visit, and found him thriving.

The months went by, and with the summer season of the following year it was impossible to scan the social columns of the daily newspapers without noticing that "among those present were Sir Hugh and Lady Mannot."

"—among those present were Sir Hugh and Lady Mannot'," Lord Cedely would read aloud at breakfast, "'the latter looking very attractive'—Attractive? What do they mean—attractive? This modern jargon! And then it goes on to describe Isobel's dress and jewellery, as though she were an actress. In my day a lady would have sued any newspaper that dared to comment on her appearance; nowadays they seem to like it."

"I'm rather surprised at Hugh in all this," Lady Cedely said doubtfully. "He always said he disliked town life. One would think he would miss the country."

"She leads him by the ears, that's what it is. I saw it coming. Mannot is too indulgent towards her; he should put his foot down."

Sonia, in a passion of envy and admiration, would collect all the

illustrated weeklies and cut out pictures of her sister, which appeared regularly.

Isobel was always exquisitely dressed; her fashions and her jewels were outstanding, in an age when London society women glittered.

She went everywhere. Lady Mannot at Ascot. Lady Mannot at So-and-so's reception. Lady Mannot at Henley. Lady Mannot wearing the gown in which she attended Their Majesties' drawing-room. Lady Mannot riding with a friend in the Row.

"In my day," said Lord Cedely, "a married woman did not ride with a 'friend' in the Row. Who is the fellow anyway? They don't tell you that—some Tom, Dick, or Harry."

"I suppose we are really very countrified and behind the times," said Lady Cedely with a sigh. "We mustn't blame Isobel for being up to date and doing as the *beau monde* does."

"*Beau monde*! Faugh!"

Hugh and Isobel returned to Chorley Beeches at the end of July. Hugh was so delighted with the progress that his son had made that he could not tear himself away again; and Isobel went off to Scotland with friends for a round of visits.

Hugh brought the baby over to Merryns regularly; he was quite wrapped up in the child.

That September Matthew went to Eton for his first half, and Bartholomew and Edward—who were both feeling lonely—became close companions.

Sonia on her sixteenth birthday put up her hair; and on one occasion when a woman guest fell out at the last minute she was allowed to borrow one of her mother's dresses, twisted a rope of pearls round her neck, and filled the empty place at the dinner-table with great aplomb.

After that occasion she never really went back to the schoolroom. She became her mother's companion, went out visiting with her in the new motor-car, and lived a pre-debutante existence. She was a daughter after Lady Cedely's own heart, for she had developed a great sense of duty and obvious social graces. Her personality was sweet and charming, and she was popular in the neighbourhood.

Life went on at Merryns; ordered, peaceful, and very quiet.

In the following spring Martin, the older footman left, to become butler-valet to a man who was going to travel in the East.

Lord Cedely sent for Edward.

"Well, Edward, we're losing Martin."

"Yes, m'lord."

"I'm sorry. He's been here a long time. I'm very old-fashioned, you know: I hate to see a servant go. It must be the lingering remains of some feudal ancestor in me. I like to see my people stay on at Merryns until they're old retainers. How long have you been here, Edward?"

"Nearly four years."

"It feels longer than that; we know you so well. You've become quite a friend to us, Edward. I can't remember what it was like before you came. I think you care for the place, don't you?"

"Very much indeed."

"I'm glad of that. It's no good living anywhere until you put roots down and feel you belong. By the way, I suppose you haven't any idea of leaving us, have you? The thought fills me with horror."

Edward smiled. "It fills me with horror too, m'lord."

"Thank God for that. Now what are we going to do about it? I've got a suggestion. How would you like to be butler, and get a couple of young footmen to work under you?"

Edward let out a startled, "Oh!"

"Well? How would you like it?"

"Very much indeed. It's very kind of you to suggest it. Do you think I'm—sedate enough to carry it off, m'lord?"

Lord Cedely roared.

"I wouldn't give tuppence for a butler who looked ninety. The whole thing seems to me an ideal arrangement. You and I understand one another so well. There would be an increase in salary for you; and you can get yourself up as dignified as you wish. Grow mutton-chop whiskers if you want to—though I hope to Heaven you won't. I should be terrified of you."

"Thank you very, very much." Edward's voice was shaky with pleasure.

"Then that's settled. And now you'd better slip down to the cellar and fetch a bottle of anything you fancy, and we'll drink to the new position. Your health and mine, and may Merryns flourish!"

Two very pleasant young footmen were supplied from Mrs Baxby's registry.

They were deferential. "Yes, Mr Shrewsbury . . . no, Mr Shrewsbury."

Edward was Mr Shrewsbury. A long way from young Eddie Boan.

2

He now had no life of his own at all.

He lived for the house, to order and direct the house. He lived for the family and in the life of the family.

Their domestic delights were his. He found his pleasure in their doings: in Sonia's grown-up airs and her delight in showing off a new dress or riding habit; in letters from Matthew at Eton and Guy at Cambridge; in field expeditions with Bartholomew, his crony, and evenings spent over the boy's stamp collection, in such small excitements as little Anthony Mannot's first steps and stuttering attempts to say his name.

Sir Hugh was always bringing the child over to be passed from knee to knee, and thoroughly spoiled by Lady Cedely and Nanny; though Isobel's visits were rare, for she was nearly always staying

with friends, and on the brief occasions when she appeared, her fashionable figure, her clothes and her conversation seemed to set her apart from her quiet country family, and make her almost a stranger in her old home.

With Edward, strange as it might seem, she was now completely at home.

He had a small sitting-room, and she would drift along there and ask him to bring her a drink, and sitting with a glass in her hand she would chat about people she had met and good times she had had, as though she felt more affinity with him than with her own people.

Not that Edward wanted her there. Her visits were painful and disturbing.

But now for the first time, after two years, she spoke of Will Hevon.

"Do you realise, Edward, that he is quite forgotten?"

"What makes you think that? His people——"

"I wasn't thinking of his people. He was a person, wasn't he? He made a corner of this place because he was vital and glowing. Because I loved him. That is all gone. And do you know why, Edward? Because I have made myself a different person. He existed for Isobel Lintern, and now she doesn't exist any more."

Her face suddenly became hollowed with grief, and tears poured down it. Was she crying, Edward wondered, for Isobel Lintern, or for her present self? He looked away, for to see her suffer for her secret memories was unbearable; but when he looked again he wondered if he had been imagining it all, her cheeks were so smooth and unstained.

"Why are you saying all this?" he said. "You've got your life. You've got everything. Anyone to see you would think you hadn't a care in the world."

"I haven't," she said. "Not a care. I'm a fool. When I look back, it seems to me as if I used to live in a kind of never-never land, where nothing seemed improbable but the world as it actually was. It wasn't life; it wasn't even real."

"And now everything is real."

"You're real. I don't know if I am."

"You're happy enough. You think too much about yourself. It isn't good."

Her beautiful eyes widened. "Are you lecturing me?"

"A little. I think you should pay more attention to people who care for you."

She smiled. "I wouldn't take that from anybody but you. Are you one of the ones who care for me?"

"A great deal."

"Oh, poor Edward! And I care for you—I care for you a lot. I am a horrid girl."

"You're thinking about yourself again; you never think about anything but yourself."

"It's true," she said. "I might have been different if——"

He blazed out at her. "You would never have been any different! I love you, and I know you, and I still love you. You would never have been any different. What about Mannot? What about Anthony? Haven't they any right to your thoughts? Think about them a bit. And get out of that never-never land of yours. It excuses nothing!"

She put down her glass abruptly. "You're right," she said. "I'm not a bit angry. You always make me feel humble, and I hate people who make me feel so; but I couldn't hate you."

She rose, and her eyes went deep into his. She moved towards him, and suddenly pressing herself against him, her hands clasped his shoulders, and she kissed him. It was she who felt the shiver that swept over him and his stunned unresponsiveness. She kissed him again, and he came to life and kissed her fiercely.

"There!" she said. "I hope that leaves you as miserable as it leaves me."

The Mannots were back in London for Christmas—though this time Hugh insisted that the child, who was eighteen months old and running about, should go too. In March they all returned to Merryns for Guy's coming of age.

This was the greatest of family occasions, and was celebrated to the full. There was a house-party of relatives and close friends; a dinner on the actual birthday, at which Guy sat at the top of a horse-shoe of tables on his father's right hand, followed by a ball to which half the county was invited. The following night there was a supper and dance for the servants and tenants, where Guy was the host and with his mother and father received and shook hands with every guest. This family and estate affair was the more intimate function of the two.

On behalf of the tenants, Evan Griffith, the senior farmer, presented Guy with a silver-mounted bridle and pair of stirrups; and on behalf of the servants Edward offered a set of brushes in a leather case.

Guy, who had broadened out his frame since he went to Cambridge and had grown quite a sizeable fair moustache, said: "I don't know how to thank you all for these wonderful presents; or what I have done to deserve them beyond giving you all a lot of trouble through the years. (Laughter.) I can see the gleam in your eye, Mr Griffith, recalling a day when I left a certain field gate open. (Loud laughter.) That our own servants should want to give me a present fills me with more amazement still, for from Mrs Dodge and Shrewsbury downwards I never gave them a minute's peace. Still, I can't thank you enough for these beautiful presents. I'm afraid I'm not much good at speech-making, I'm not that sort of Cambridge man. (Laughter.) My youngest brother has the gift of the gab to a far greater extent. All I want to say is that now I've come of age I

feel I belong more closely to Merryns and to all of you than ever before. (Clapping and cheers.) I have heard some of you talk about me as 'the young heir'. That doesn't please me at all, because I hope that my dear father is good for at least another forty years before I step into his shoes. (Cheers.) He's only fifty-five, and old Daddy Jones over there is ninety-five, and why shouldn't my father be as good a man as he is? (Roars of laughter.)

"What I want to say (went on Guy) is that in another year's time I shall be leaving Cambridge and coming among you, to live here permanently on the estate. I hope then to be able to take much of the care of it from my father's shoulders. I want to get to know you all a great deal better and more intimately; I want to learn a lot from you, if you'll be patient enough to teach me. I'd like to try my hand at a bit of practical farming—now don't look so thunderstruck, all of you! I'm not so green as you think! (Laughter.) I want, in short, to keep Merryns as it has always been, and to make it even better, and to feel that you and I belong together for the rest of our lives, and may they be long ones! And before I sit down, I want to pay a tribute to my father and my mother, the best in the world. (Deafening cheers, in which the rest of Guy's sentence was drowned.) I'm glad you all agree with me. Now are all your glasses full? . . . Yes? . . . Well, drink a toast with me—To Merryns, coupled with the names of my dear parents!"

The toast was drunk, and everyone was laughing and weeping at the same time. Lady Cedely cried unashamedly, with Guy's arm round her shoulders, and his father was so affected that he had to put his glass down.

"Finest speech I ever heard in my life," said one of the tenant farmers. "What a boy to be proud of!"

Then Edward got up and proposed the great toast of the evening, the health of young Guy Lintern.

"That's enough of that," cried Guy, scarlet-faced, when the cheering died down. "Now let's get on with the dancing. To the ballroom, all of you! And Mrs Dodge, you're having the first one with me, and we've chosen a waltz because you said it was the only dance you could do!"

The ball went on till four o'clock in the morning, for Guy had made it a point of honour to dance with every woman in the room, if it was only for a few turns. Sonia, now seventeen, was delirious with happiness, for she—the daughter of the house—was the undisputed belle of the ball; and Matthew and Bartholomew at their first grown-up party were so tireless that even when it was all over they refused to go to bed, and saddled up the horses to go for a ride in the dawn.

Isobel and Hugh left next morning, and the house-party broke up. Lady Cedely said to her husband, "I don't know why Isobel has to rush straight off to London again. I'm sure Hugh doesn't care for it much, and she could at least have stayed until the season begins,

when I shall be there myself with Sonia.” Sonia was to be presented at one of the May Drawing-rooms, and was looking forward with breathless excitement to her first season, and to being Guy’s guest at the Trinity College Ball. Everyone at Merryns had a share in her pleasure, for she carried round little snippings of dress materials to be admired, and fashion plates to be considered; and listened with rapt attention to the advice of Nanny and Miss Jeffery—who was leaving, to make her home with her sister—and Edward, and Cook, and the maid who did her room. Sonia’s coming-out was a personal affair to them all, and she had promised each one a portrait of herself in her Court train and feathers.

“She’s a happy, simple girl,” said old Nanny. “God bless her, and send her a man that’s worthy of her, and a home as loving as the one she leaves.”

Then one morning early Hugh Mannot rode up to the house and asked for Lord Cedely. Edward let him in, and saw that his face was haggard and his forehead twitching as he took off his hat.

There was a hush in the house, and a travelling whisper that something had happened. At noon one of the footmen told Edward that Lady Cedely wanted to see him in her sitting-room.

He found her seated with her hands clasped in her lap; she looked pale and she had been weeping.

“Come in, Edward, and shut the door. Sit down, please.”

“Yes, m’lady?”

“Edward, I have something to tell you, and very briefly. Isobel has left her husband. She has gone away with a Captain Forryst. Sir Hugh is going to divorce her. Those are the facts, and as everyone in the house will have to know, I want you to tell them the exact truth. I will not have distortion, gossip, and speculation, and I am leaving you to see to it. Thank God, I can trust you.”

“M’lady, I don’t know what to say.”

“I know you must feel it very much, because you are like one of the family. It is a thing that I never thought would come to our home. Lord Cedely and I are very broken.”

“I’m desperately sorry. You can leave it to me. I’ll speak to the staff myself, and I promise you there won’t be any talking.”

“Thank you, Edward. It is our wish that her name should not be mentioned again in this house. We have the younger ones to think of. Please see that everything goes on as before.”

“Of course I will.”

“Edward, you are a great comfort to us. I don’t know what we should do without you.”

“Thank you. Thank you, m’lady.”

Sonia lay wildly sobbing on her bed, while Nanny tried in vain to comfort her.

“I’ll never forgive Isobel—never, never! I hate her. How could she do this to me? I shan’t be able to have any season now, the

Queen won't want me to be presented. My whole life is ruined. How could she? My hateful sister will be the talk of London."

"Hush, my dearie. It won't be as bad as that."

"But it will! Everybody will point at me, nobody will want to know me. They'll think I'm like my beastly sister. It is a frightful thing to be divorced; it is like being a leper."

"You shouldn't know about such things."

"How can I help knowing? I read the papers. It just doesn't happen to people like us!"

"Well, wait, dearie, and don't take on like that. Things are never so bad as they seem at first. The Queen knows your father and mother; she'll be sorry for them; she won't hold it against you, her Majesty won't. And if she doesn't, nobody will dare to."

So it turned out. Sonia's presentation took place, the nine days' gossip died down, and she enjoyed her season. Isobel's name was never mentioned, it was as though it had ceased to be; but Edward, scanning the newspapers, saw at last that the divorce had gone through.

Sonia had had a wonderfully happy season, and seeing her daughter's unaffected delight and undoubted popularity, Lady Cedely cheerfully sat for hours on little hard chairs in hot ballrooms and tried not to long for the peace of Merryns.

"Another letter from her," Nanny would say. "The sweet that she is! She's having a lovely time. Here's a little cutting from the dress she wore when she went to Cambridge to Guy's party—isn't that pretty? Blue gauze with little dewdrops sewn on it. She must have looked a dream, and I bet all the young men fell flat on their faces; but I hope she won't make up her mind in a hurry, not till Mr Right comes along. She sends you her love, Edward—and to Ada, and to Bella, and she wants to know if you got your photographs."

Sonia's photograph in her Court dress stood on Edward's chest of drawers; he would treasure it all his life.

In the following summer Sonia was invited to go to India as companion to the daughter of the Viceroy. The whole family was delighted, though Matthew—now in the sixth form at Eton, and a member of Pop—warned her against marrying a Maharajah. The pig-sticking and tiger-hunting would be good, he said, but zenana life was restricting.

Bartholomew was also at Eton now, very serious and thoughtful for fifteen. In the holidays, while Matthew—crazy about sport—was away with friends, the younger boy and Edward would spend their leisure time walking and talking.

One evening they stood by the same reedy pool where they used to skate, while the motionless water held the last of the light and reflected it back to the sky.

"Edward, I've been wondering a great deal. Do you think my father will let me go into the Church? It is what I want to do."

"I think your father will let you follow any career you choose,

Barty, if he is convinced that you really know what you want. You're a bit young to know yet—if you don't mind my saying so."

"But I'm not! That's what you don't understand—oh, I can't expect you to, but I'm so convinced myself. Just as Guy has always known that his life was meant to be lived here at home and on the estate, and Matthew has been set on Sandhurst and the Army ever since he went to school, so I know that I want to be a clergyman. It sounds presumptuous to talk about vocation, but that is what it is to me. I find it much easier to speak to you in this way than I would to my father."

"I think it's always easier to talk to others than one's family. But, Barty, you've just been confirmed, your mind is full of such things, idealistic and exalted——"

"Do you think idealism and exaltation are things to be shed as one grows older? I don't. I think they are things of the spirit, to grow."

"If you feel like that, your religion is a real thing to you."

"Yes, it is. It is as much part of my life as eating and sleeping, and hitting a cricket ball and rowing on the river at Windsor. I know I shall never stop being fond of games, because I was born with a straight eye and I like to think I'll be swinging a bat when I'm seventy, *and* beating Matt at tennis; in the same way, I know that when I am in church my spirit is at home, and I want some day to stand before the altar and in the pulpit. The other night my father referred vaguely to my career, as though he expected me to begin to think over what I want to do. Do you think I shall be able to make him understand that my mind is quite made up, and that I'm not too young to know?"

"If you talk to him as you've just talked to me he's bound to understand."

"That's good. I feel perfectly happy. Do you ever feel perfectly happy, Edward, with a wonderful sense that everything is in harmony?"

"I don't think one can quite feel like that—as one gets older."

"How old are you?"

"I'm twenty-seven."

"Heavens! That's young. I know that when I'm twenty-seven I shall feel just as I do now."

"I hope you always will."

"I know I will. Why must grown-ups always turn so pessimistic? I was in your room the other day, looking for you, and there was a book of poetry open on the table. I read some lines and they stuck with me . . .

'. . . thus with the year
Seasons return, but not to me returns
Day, or the sweet approach of ev'n or morn,
Or sight of vernal bloom or summer's rose,
Or flocks or herds or human face divine.'

Why must you read such sad stuff? It sent my spirits down a mile."

"But it's beautiful."

"Beautiful, but a bit decadent. I prefer something cheerful, like 'Hence, loathed melancholy.' Oh look, Edward, there goes the old heron, like a wisp of smoke. I'm hungry. Let's go home and make coffee and anchovy toast in your room."

3

"Look, Edward! You must read Sonia's letter for yourself," cried Lady Cedely. "We're all so happy. She's coming home, and she wants our consent to her engagement. Her fiancé writes too, and he is Bob Thirlwood, the son of some old friends, and the very one we'd have chosen for her. He's been an aide-de-camp to the Viceroy, and he's leaving the Army and going to settle down at Ashwell Manor. Isn't it lovely?"

Excitement ran through the whole house. "There!" said Nanny. "I knew the blessed girl would pick the right one. Why, Bob Thirlwood used to come here to parties when he was six, in a velvet suit, and I've sponged his sticky fingers many a time, and yet she has to go all the way to India to meet him! We'll have such a wedding!"

The happy announcement went straight into *The Times*.

"A marriage has been arranged and will shortly take place between Robert, Viscount Thirlwood of Ashwell, Shropshire, and the Hon. Sonia Lintern, daughter of Lord and Lady Cedely of Merryns, Denbighshire."

Then Sonia herself was home, and after more than a year's absence couldn't stop talking; and her fiancé, a pleasant, debonaire young man, was scrutinised and thoroughly discussed in the servants' hall and voted the real thing. Their happiness was so patent that it would have made a confirmed cynic feel sentimental.

Sonia wanted to be married in the village church. "I do, Mummy, and it's no good anybody arguing. I want one of those romantic, old-fashioned weddings with everybody throwing roses about and going weepy and saying, 'Bless the sweet bride, it only seems yesterday that she was christened!' Then when I'm an old woman it will be much more to look back on than a lot of starch and fashion in Hanover Square. And I'll tell you another thing——"

The 'other thing' was important, and Sonia broached it nervously. "I want Edward. Now don't flinch and go white, Mummy, I don't mean for ever, because I know Merryns couldn't hold up its head without him for more than a few months, and I'm not a pirate to rob you of your treasure. But I'm so inexperienced, and I thought if you could spare him he could get my home going for me, and when it's running smoothly you can have him back."

"You don't want much!" said Lord Cedely. "In my day young

people sorted out their own affairs. What does Edward say to this? Or were you thoughtful enough to consult your aged parents first?"

"Oh no, Father. I spoke to Edward first, and he says that he'll come if you'll let him."

"That settles it, then. Far be it from me to interfere with any plans that Edward may have concocted with my daughter. But don't keep him long."

Edward left in advance for Ashwell Manor, and by the time the young couple came back from their honeymoon he had engaged a staff for them and everything was running smoothly.

"Don't leave us, Edward," Sonia begged. "If you go the cook will go—I can feel it—and everything will fall to pieces."

Their home was a small, beautifully proportioned Queen Anne house, furnished with old family furniture, some of it from Merryns and some from Thirlwood's own home. He and Sonia were like two children playing in a beloved doll's house, surrounded by the peace and prosperity of the Edwardian age in golden flower. There was nothing to mar their happiness or cast a shadow on their days.

Edward would say, "Are you entirely satisfied with the parlour-maid, m'lady?"

"No, Edward, I'm not. She has cold fingers and she breathes heavily. Find another one. And, Edward, if you call me 'm'lady', you and I will part enemies. Miss Sonia, if you please."

"She isn't going to be satisfied with any of the staff," said Thirlwood, laughing, "because she knows that when she is you will go back to Merryns, Edward. It's a plot to keep you."

"It won't work," Edward said with mock severity. "Not now that I know."

Only the sourest of natures could have failed to be happy living in a house with that young couple, so deeply and candidly in love. Their carefree bliss seemed to penetrate into the very walls of the house, giving off an atmosphere that was like a perfume. They were so friendly, so ingenuous; and taking it for granted that everyone in their home found life as lovely a game as they did, they somehow managed to make it so.

There was a great deal of entertaining to do, for Sonia, proud of her home, with its beautiful appointments, was eager to act hostess. Her husband's parents came to stay; then her own parents came to stay. When Bartholomew was on holiday, and Matthew on leave from Sandhurst, they and Guy must come to stay, and have all their favourite foods at every meal, and plenty of fishing and tennis. Then there were so many friends made in London and in India who must be invited to visit that time whirled by and Edward was still indispensable.

Then it was, "Oh Edward, you must stay until the baby comes. You simply can't leave me now. What should I do if any of the staff left?"

Sonia's son was born, the staff seemed to be as steady as rocks, and Edward had been at Ashwell for fourteen months. There was no adequate reason to keep him any longer, and a day came when Thirlwood drove him all the way back to Merryns in the new motor-car; a triumphant arrival, for they drew up before the entrance with a roar and a flourish, and everybody seemed to be either at the windows or on the steps.

Bartholomew, who had arrived home the day before, came rushing into the drive

"Hullo, Edward! This is magnificent. Here you are, and Matt starts his leave tomorrow, and we're all arriving at home at once"

It was a heart-warming welcome. Edward was touched when the young footmen, Arthur and James, said, "We're so glad you've come back, Mr Shrewsbury. It hasn't been the same without you." Mrs Dodge offered sherry in her room, and in came Lady Cedely to clasp both his hands in hers and cry, "If you hadn't come we were going to descend on Sonia like buccaneers and steal you back"

At dinner Lord Cedely said, "Well, no more of this, Edward. Borrowing you, indeed. It's been like a lifetime. Thank heaven you're home!"

As dark was falling he walked round the quiet gardens, the pipe to which he had recently taken, between his teeth.

The grass beneath his feet was like grey velvet, and the pale flowers, visited by moths, were faintly sweet. He walked under the towering trees and heard the last sleepy quarrels of nesting rooks, saw the downy swoop of an owl, lingered by the pool with its dark glitter. The earth seemed to sigh as it rested in the arms of night. Behind him lights in the house gleamed through the dusk

Home! he thought. Yes, this is home to me. I have come home

4

Sonia, who could not stay away from Merryns for long, came on a month's visit, bringing her baby with her.

Happy in all the admiration and petting, she would say, "But I'm miserable without Bob. I've left half of myself at home"

"I like to hear you say that," said Lady Cedely. "It's so wonderful to see anyone really in love."

"Oh, we're thoroughly, unashamedly in love, Mummy, and I think it's going to last for ever. We've been very lucky. We've got everything in the world, but even if we hadn't, I think we could cheerfully live in a cottage on potatoes to be together."

"If I heard some girls say that I should think it was pure affectation, but I believe you, Sonia. You always had a simple, satisfied nature, and I can't tell you how glad I am that life has turned out so beautifully for you. You deserved that it should, but everybody doesn't get what they deserve from life."

Sonia smiled. "At least I have the satisfaction of knowing that I'm not enjoying something I *don't* deserve—or so you say."

She went on, "Do you see anything of little Anthony?"

Lady Cedely looked sad.

"No, we don't, Sonia. Hugh never comes near us now, and I don't like to press him to. We hear of them through mutual friends. Anthony is five now, and they say he is much too advanced for his age. Dorothy Millant told me he talks like a man of forty. Hugh makes a constant companion of him, and talks to him as though they were of the same age; it must be so bad for the child. Hugh has him sleeping in his room too, as though he couldn't bear him out of his sight. It's a morbid devotion, but one can't blame Hugh after what he has gone through. It might have been the other way round; some fathers might have turned against the child."

"Where's Isobel?" Sonia asked abruptly.

"Sonia, I don't know. Nobody seems to know. I'd be afraid to ask."

"I'm sorry, Mummy."

She walked over to the window and looked out.

"Oh, there goes Guy! Do you know, I'm absolutely terrified of him these days. I know he's father's pride and joy and a credit to the family, and the darling of all the tenants, but he's so brusque with me, and his clothes!"

"Why, what has he got on that you object to?"

"If you must know, he looks very efficient and impressive in the shabbiest corduroys, and open-necked shirt, and leather patches on his elbows."

"Guy is taking himself so seriously, and we're delighted with him, even if he does choose to dress like a farmer and do the most dreadful things, like assisting at the sows' confinements. He even sits in the estate office, poring over maps and figures, which is more than your dear father would ever do."

"He is much too serious and he needs reforming," Sonia said, "and I know just the girl for him. Mary Maynard. She is the nicest girl I know, and sings divinely, and there's no one I should like better for a sister-in-law."

("Will you please keep Sonia off me!" Guy had cried indignantly. "I'm not a subject for any match-makers. When I want a wife I'm capable of choosing my own.")

His passion for practical farming absorbed him, as time went by, to the exclusion of all other interests except such country sports as rough shooting and a little hunting in the winter. The three brothers were utterly different in their tastes, all highly individualistic, for Matthew was wrapped up in his Army career and saw himself eventually as the youngest colonel in the British Army, while Bartholomew, almost ready to enter on his divinity course at Oxford, had never wavered in his choice of a career.

"So Barty's going to be a parson, Edward? You think that's right for him?"

"Yes, I do, m'lord. Barty has always been a rather 'different' person—set apart, you might say. He's sincere, and truly religious."

"He is indeed—and in no namby-pamby way either. He'll be a credit to the church that gets him, and I'm quite sure that nobody will go to sleep under his sermons! Though just between you and me, I never thought we'd have an evangelical divine in our family. I'm a lucky fellow, Edward, to have three such sons as I've got. It's life's greatest gift; and as I see it come to flower I'll enjoy a grand old age. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing that I can see, m'lord."

"Well, let's touch our glasses to it—you and I. I sometimes forget you're a young man yourself. How old are you?"

"Thirty, m'lord."

"Is that all? Haven't you ever thought of settling down yourself? Some of my farmers have the most charmingly pretty daughters, and I'd gladly give you a house on the estate."

"I haven't thought of such a thing."

"You haven't? Well—it's *your* life."

Guy fell in love quite suddenly. She was a rector's daughter from a neighbouring parish, a plain, homely girl with a quiet charm of her own, who reared chickens and bred spaniels—"and the last person you'd ever have thought of for Guy," declared Sonia, "who was so sophisticated, and at twenty-one would not even dance with a woman unless she was a belle and a beauty."

Lady Cedely wrote to a relative

"... We cannot help being fond of dear Evelyn, and her parents are the sweetest people. Guy met her at the local Show, and their courtship has been conducted in the presence of her prize cockerels, which have always been—or so I gather—the main topic of their conversation. There is no doubt she will make Guy a wife after his own heart, and we are rebuilding and furnishing Willow End for them, that nice old house at the top of north park. Meanwhile this excitement has almost overshadowed our dear Matthew's coming of age..."

Matthew's coming of age. Bartholomew's departure for Oxford. These were family landmarks, to keep life at Merryns keyed up, busy, happy, and full.

Then Matthew was off to Ireland with his regiment, and the whole family was on the steps to see him go and wish him luck. He looked superbly confident in his uniform.

"Oh, Edward," said Lady Cedely, laying her hand on his arm as they stood in the chilly grey morning watching the last of the

carriage down the drive, "now that I have a son a soldier all I can think of is my hope that he may never have to fight. I never thought of such things before for other mothers' sons—it shows how selfish and self-centred one can get. You don't really think there'll ever be another war, do you? One hears frightening rumours—and that horrible jangle about '—in nineteen hundred and ten, the Germans will conquer the Englishmen'."

"It's utter nonsense," broke in Lord Cedely. "You old Mother Shipton, you! We're too civilised to go to war. But I must say the boy looks fine in his uniform."

"What are soldiers for, then?"

"To look smart, of course, and parade before their Majesties. Matthew is so cock-a-hoop with the allowance I'm giving him I'm sorry for Ireland!"

Guy's wedding was the homeliest affair. It took place in his bride's father's church, and apart from a few of Guy's relatives, the place was packed with villagers from the two parishes, and of course all the tenants and the servants from Merryns. The bride had made her own white cambric dress, and her bridesmaid was the organist's daughter. The small reception was held at the Rectory, and afterwards the young men of the village took the horses out of the shafts and pulled the young couple's carriage all the way to Willow End, for they were dispensing with a honeymoon in their eagerness to get settled in their own home among the dog-kennels and the up-to-date chicken-houses.

A week later they attended a dinner-party which Lady Cedely insisted on giving for them at Merryns, and afterwards went down to the servants' hall to have their healths drunk and make speeches.

"I say, Edward, I want a word with you," said Guy. "Can we go to your room?"

Once up there he relaxed in a basket chair and offered Edward his tobacco pouch.

"It's just this. Evelyn and I haven't been used to running a house, and Willow End isn't small. This place goes on oiled wheels, and I suppose I've taken it for granted. We've got some servants down there, but it all seems higgledy-piggledy, especially as we're out of doors all day and can't keep a proper eye on things. I wondered——"

"You did? I wonder what his lordship will say? I mean, it's only three years since Miss Sonia——"

Guy burst out laughing. "I can see I'll have to tackle my father. But would you be willing? Do say yes, Edward, and save our lives!"

"If it was for me to say, I couldn't say no to any of you, sir, and you know it."

Lord Cedely, as might be expected, burst into flames.

"Why can't you young people make out for yourselves? Edward isn't a parcel to be handed round the family; he's my butler and I want him and I need him. It's infernal cheek, Guy."

"I know, Father. I know it's the most dreadful cheek and quite inexcusable, but you wouldn't like to see my home go to rack and ruin, would you? And I do feel I'm useful to you on the estate, and I don't often ask any favours. Let me have him for a month! Please, Father. Just one little month. You'll hardly notice it."

"I don't know what your mother will say."

"Mother? What has Mother ever said to me in my life but, 'Take what you want, darling?'"

"You're utterly spoilt. All right, then, you may have him, but under protest. And you are to keep him one month, no more; that's understood? If your house isn't organised by then, it must make do."

"Thank you, Father," said Guy, beaming. "Evelyn and I will be eternally grateful to you."

They had cause to be more grateful than they knew, for before that month was up Guy was unlucky enough to be thrown by a young horse he was breaking in, and a fractured right leg and collar-bone made him a petulant and frantic invalid for weeks. The newly engaged housekeeper at Willow End proved unsatisfactory; there was a succession of indifferent cooks. Edward coped with staff problems and damp walls too hastily smoothed over by the builders; Evelyn did the cooking and attended to hundreds of chicks and young turkeys.

Edward stayed at Willow End for five months, and by then the staff was organised and working efficiently, Guy was himself again, and Lady Cedely was paying daily exasperated visits and saying, "Children, don't you really think you could manage alone?"

On the day that Edward returned to Merryns Guy handed him a small box which contained a gold watch and chain

"It's from Evelyn and me," he explained, "with our warmest thanks. Now go and have a couple of years of peace at Merryns before Matthew wants you. Father's problem will be how to say 'No' to Matthew after saying 'Yes' to Sonia and me."

It was very quiet at Merryns now, with only Bartholomew coming home for the Oxford vacations. The happiest times were summer days when Guy and Evelyn would drop in, and Sonia would come to spend a short visit with her two children, and tea would be served on the lawn under the cedar tree.

"Edward's awfully good with babies," Sonia would say. "It's a natural gift. My Sylvia has the most deplorably unsociable nature, and yet look at the way she coos when he picks her up! And Francis simply won't be torn from him."

Letters went round the family, and Matthew wrote from Woolwich, where he was now stationed: "I hear that Sonia and Guy have both had Edward. It seems to me an admirable arrangement, and I've duly taken note of it. I always was a man of foresight, and as I already have my eye on the girl of my dreams—if she'll have me!—I warn you all, it's my turn next!"

"Turn, indeed!" said Lord Cedely. "There's no turn about it. All I can say is that this circus started without my approval and when it ends I'll be glad. Tell Matthew"—he added sarcastically—"to be sure and let me know when he requires Edward, and how long for. Then there's only Barty, thank God, and after that perhaps I may have Edward to care for me in my old age."

"... Dorothy and I are going to be married before the regiment sails for India," wrote Matthew, after announcing his engagement to his Colonel's daughter. "I suppose you wouldn't let Edward come out to Quetta with us for a few months?"

Lord Cedely wrote back that before he would allow Edward to go to India with Matthew he would see the whole regiment at the bottom of the ocean.

"... that will not be necessary," Matthew wrote in reply. "Orders are changed and our departure deferred. Dorothy and I are to be married on the arranged date, in London—of course you are all coming—and we have taken a furnished house on Shooter's Hill for six months. Please, Father, may we have Edward? I don't really see how you can say No, without hurting my feelings by the natural implication that I am less to you than Guy and Sonia."

"But of course I can say No! I'm saying it now. No!"

Dorothy was a nice girl. She and Sonia took to one another instantly; and Sonia said, "Of course they must have Edward. Don't be so stuffy, Father." 'Stuffy' was the word of the moment.

Edward went to Shooter's Hill and stayed for four months. Then back to the old welcome, and the beauty of Merryns in the autumn-time, followed by a great treat when Lord Cedely took him to visit Bartholomew at Balliol. They lunched in his rooms and went round to see the sights of the city; St Mary's Church, the small gem of Exeter Chapel, Shelley's memorial, Tom Quad, Magdalen Gardens. They walked in the Meadows, were shown the Balliol barge, and listened to Barty's glowing description of Eights Week, bumping races, and the College ball. They punted up the Cherwell; dined and slept at the Mitre.

"Ah well," said Lord Cedely. "It's an enchanted city, and once the magic has taken you it never lets you go. Thank God, we've got Merryns to go home to! I always feel it would be too much of an anti-climax to plunge into London after this. I wonder how Barty will feel, with all his sensibility, when the time comes to tear himself away? I still wouldn't be surprised if he got himself elected a Fellow of All Souls', and settled down for life with a set of panelled rooms and a library, and an evening walk under the lime-trees and the rest of the world forgot."

"Barty's a human being, m'lord, not a dry scholar."

"I think you're right. I can see Barty rip-roaring away in the pulpit and shocking the parish out of its apathy, can't you? But he'll

never be the Cathedral type. He's too unorthodox. Let's see, Edward, how old is he now?"

"Twenty."

"Twenty! That means another coming of age next year. And he was such a little chap when you came to us. How long have you been with us, Edward?"

"Ten years, m'lord."

"It's flown. And it's been a lively ten years, with the children growing up and getting homes of their own. Well, God grant us ten years of peace now. Will that suit you, Edward?"

"Very well indeed."

5

The main event of the following year was Bartholomew's coming of age. There were house-parties at Merryns, and something of the old lavish hospitality was revived. Guy and Evelyn came frequently. They had a baby daughter now.

"You see?" Guy would say laughingly to his friends "Everybody can have a boy except the heir."

"I tell him not to worry," said Evelyn calmly. "The next will be a boy, and I intend to have at least six."

Such outspokenness was uncommon in 1913, and everybody said how quaint and refreshing Evelyn was.

"Come up to my room when this is over, Edward," Mrs Dodge would say, "and I'll have a hot snack for you. I declare, if it wasn't for the twinges I wouldn't be able to feel my feet. Old age, that's what it is. When I think how we faced our days, back in the old times, with the house full of guests, luncheons and dinners and balls, and night after night too, I can only say I don't know how I did it. It's a good thing life eases off a bit as you get older, or we'd all be in our graves by fifty."

Christmas that year was more of a nursery affair, with the tall tree in the ballroom hung with less sophisticated gifts than it had borne for years: dolls and golliwogs and wooden engines. Guy feeling sheepish in a tent-like garment of red flannel made by Nanny, and a fuzzy beard, acted Santa Claus. Nanny, sewing little pink silk bags to fill with sweets, was back in the happiest days of her life.

Hugh Mannot, morose and grey-haired now, for the sake of the child was persuaded to bring little Anthony. His son and Isobel's at eight years old was thin, anxious, and disposed to shrink behind his father. He had a nervous stammer and avoided even his grandparents. It was sad to see him so.

Sonia's pair, rosy and robust, behaved imperiously; Guy's Diana, already sturdy and toddling, showed independence and shouted opposition down.

Here already, Edward thought, was the new generation growing up at Merryns, and time went so quickly, life flowed away. What

had his life been, anyway, but a leaf caught among the reeds in the backwater of a country stream?

"Edward, hold my engine!"

"Edward, lift me up—I can't see."

Edward! Edward! Edward! New children's voices like the old ones, always demanding.

"They'll eat you alive, Edward," Bartholomew said, laughing. "I never realised small children could be so wearing. Who'd have kids, anyway?"

You will! Edward thought. You'll be the next, suddenly to love a girl and marry her and be the father of her children; close and warm in your own home, a family unit, a life within a life, a life lived and fulfilled in the simple perfection that Nature demands. You, with your laughing face, will never know sterility and frustration and the death that is parting from your love.

Christmas over, the bleakness of winter locked the little world of Merryns. January froze, and February was no better.

So rarely did Edward receive a letter, so little did the idea of one mean to him, that when sorting the post on a February morning he found one addressed to himself he slipped it into his pocket with only half a thought, to read when he had time.

After breakfast he went to his room, and took the letter out. The small neat handwriting was unfamiliar. He slit the envelope and took out two closely written pages.

*Gimmell House
Nr. Middleham
Yorks.*

"My dear Edward——"

Hastily he turned the sheets over to find the signature . . . "Isobel Horland."

The effect of the first name was like a blow; the second meant nothing to him.

"My dear Edward,

"I am trying to imagine the look of surprise on your face as you read this letter. It has been such a long, long time. Time for you to—could it be?—misunderstand? Hate me? Forget me?

"I hope, none of those dreadful things, but that somehow you still like me a little, because once you liked me so much.

"How I look at it is this way; the pattern of my life got twisted before it had really begun. It never ran straight and true like the family pattern, so neither was I straight and true, but it wasn't my fault. I didn't choose it that way.

"I had to go as I was driven, and in any case I think I was destined to live without forgiveness. If *he* had not died I should still have

been unforgiven, but I think my life would have been happier. Simplicity is always happy, and my heart was simple then and my mind clear. But he had to die, because somehow his pattern got entangled with mine, and mine was the bad one that sent all others awry. Even yours! I can never expect to be understood, because I was born among people who only see the beautifully obvious. I was born into a way of life in which I never fitted. I have never spoken to anyone like this before, and you are the only one to whom I dare speak. Lately I have had a good deal of sympathy with the misfits of the world, the people who get kicked about.

"I know everything about life at Merryns during the past six or seven years. People I used to know still write to me, I suppose because they are curious about me and want to know what eventually will happen to that dreadful little Isobel Lintern. The history of those years is no business of anyone but myself. I am neither ashamed nor regretful, because I suppose I have none of an honest woman's reactions. I just take life as I find it.

"Now I will tell you about myself, Edward. I am married. My husband is a trainer of race-horses at a stable at Middleham, near our house. We are going to be happy here, there is no reason why we should not. One's life eventually resolves itself.

"Edward, I want you. I need you. I want you to come and run my house for me and make it real and solid. I want you to establish me

"Don't throw my poor little letter on the fire! Please think! Please read on. I know what you did for the others. I heard. Sonia. Guy. Matthew. Am I less to you than they?"

"I wouldn't ask you if things were not regular here, but they are. Oh, I do need you, to balance me, to give me confidence in the future. It need only be for a little time. I would not monopolise you or drag you away from your real home, which is Merryns. If you could find it in your heart to do me this service!

"I am writing with so much hope now that my pen is flying over the paper. Perhaps I am a fool to hope, but ever since that night you will remember, I have thought of you as my champion. Why does emotion expressed always make one sound perfectly priggish? Oh, Edward, what a fool I always was, and am.

"If I say any more I shall spoil it. Only tell me that you will come.

"Your sincere friend,

"Isobel Horland."

For more than an hour he sat with the letter in his hand. It took him as long as that even to control his whirling mind. It was as though she were with him, here in the room, for he had not so much read the written words as heard her actually speaking them. It did not even occur to him to doubt that he must go to her. Of course he would go; it was as though he had been waiting all the years for this.

His mind was made up, and what came next would be just the beating of waves against a granite rock. He must meet the storm.

He got up at last, put the letter into his pocket; went back to his work.

He waited until past three o'clock in the afternoon, and then went to the library, where Lord Cedely was sitting.

"May I speak to you, m'lord?"

"Of course, Edward. Anything wrong?"

He stood beside the big mahogany table.

"Sit down, Edward—if it's going to take long."

"I'd rather stand."

"What's happened now?"

"I've had a letter from—Miss Isobel."

Lord Cedely's face tightened. "Well?"

"She's married—Mrs Horland. She lives at Middleham in Yorkshire. She has a house. She has asked me to go and run it for her—as I did for—the others."

Lord Cedely swung round to the fire of blazing logs.

"Good God!" It was contemptuous, final. It said plainly that the interview was ended.

Edward waited. The fire-logs crackled, and a burst of wind-driven rain battered the windows.

"I suppose you felt you ought to tell me this?" Lord Cedely said.

"I had to tell you. I want your permission to go."

"To—— Are you mad?"

"I suppose it seems like that to you, m'lord. Would you care to read the letter?"

"I don't want to read the letter. Edward, what has come over you that you should even consider this?"

"I feel that I owe it to her as much as I did to the others."

"Are you comparing Sonia and the boys with her?"

"It isn't quite like that."

"I should hope it isn't. I see you have some misguided idea of loyalty to her. It isn't even thinkable. I'm glad you came to me, because I can tell you at once that I'd no more let you go to her than I'd let you throw yourself in the lake—if I caught you at it."

"Do you say she oughtn't to be given a chance, m'lord?"

"A chance? Don't be so damned sentimental. Look here, I'll talk to you as I'd talk to one of my own sons. Sit down! That's better. Now what has she been saying to you? Pleading? Wheedling?"

"It isn't like that. She's sincere."

"Edward, if I had the slightest faith in Isobel, I'd tell you so. I'm no heavy Victorian father. I don't thunder and condemn without grounds. I don't thunder and condemn at all. I only want to remind you of what she did. She left a good and adoring husband, and a child, because she was so damned selfish and shallow that she was only capable of grabbing at the sensation of a moment. She was

always like that, she lived for self-gratification. That kind of nature doesn't change. All right! Don't let's have any more good lives sacrificed to it. What do you say she calls herself now? Mrs Somebody-or-other? What about the fellow she went away with? What happened to him? And were there others in between? If you knew how I loathed having to talk like this! It's the first time in all these years that I've been compelled to do so. Don't think that Lady Cedely and I haven't suffered. You don't lose a child and ever feel the same again."

"I'm sorry."

"I know you are. Your feelings do you credit, or I wouldn't think so much of you and waste my time talking to you like this. Oh, I know all about your sincerity. You think of her as still being one of the family, and all the rest of it. Once a Lintern always a Lintern. She'll do right by you. Etcetera, etcetera. God help you! Is that enough?"

"M'lord, haven't I made it clear to you that—in spite of everything—I'm still asking your permission to go?"

"Are you so obstinate?"

"I am."

"Then I'll have to tell you something I've never breathed to a soul. I heard it from one of the farmers, and apparently it was no secret in the countryside. That very summer she married Mannot she was carrying on an affair with that young chap who was killed by a bull—you remember? An affair in the fullest sense of the word. My daughter! His death ended it, it seems, and straight from that she went to Mannot. She could do a thing like that! I tell you, it put ten years on me. Her mother doesn't know and never will. No, Edward, it was the end. You don't have to answer her letter. The responsibility is mine."

"I still intend to go to her, m'lord."

"I cannot believe it."

"I only know I must go."

"I never thought a thing like this *could* happen."

"Neither did I."

"Edward, if you go directly against my wishes in this, it's all over. You'll never come back to Merryns. I mean it. Think that over."

"I—I have thought it over."

Lord Cedely stared at Edward, at the taut whiteness of his face and the sudden outbreak of sweat on his temples.

"Go on—go! I can't stand any more of this."

He went up to his room and stood looking out at the rain, and the tossing, wind-driven trees, the mist-sodden gardens.

It need not have been like this! he thought. It need not have been! It's his fault. Why couldn't he understand that I love her?

It seemed to him all day as he went about his duties that the house itself was watching him, waiting for him to relent and break.

He served dinner to Lord Cedely alone, and not a word was spoken. Lady Cedely did not appear, but at about nine o'clock she sent a footman with a message that she wished to see Edward in her room.

She looked frail, and he noticed for the first time that the years had left a mark on her. She was ageing. One only notices such things in a rare moment of awareness, for the people with whom one lives do not seem to change.

"What is this I hear, Edward?"

"I'm very sorry about it, m'lady. I never intended it to hurt you, or meant it to be like this at all. I didn't dream that Lord Cedely would take it so."

"How else could he take it, when he feels so terribly about—about Isobel? Terribly! Now you know how he feels it must alter your decision. You didn't understand what it meant to him, did you?"

"I didn't understand. But it can't alter my decision. If you would only not talk about it any more——"

"But you know what you're doing? If I were he I couldn't have given that ultimatum, but he gave it. If it means so much to him—if he'd go as far as that, you must give way. You couldn't——" Her lips quivered with disappointment; then her Irish pride and anger flared.

"You could not leave us like this!"

"I don't want to leave." He said it so passionately that she looked at him closely for a minute, as if she simply could not understand him.

She said, "Things will look different tomorrow. The longer it works in your mind——"

"But you must know, Lady Cedely, I wrote to Mrs Horland this afternoon. I told her I would go."

"Oh! What a ridiculous, stupid thing to do!" She was puzzled, upset, angry. "You make it clear that you intend to leave us. I wish you could have done it in a less hurtful way."

Had she, with her fine perception, thought Edward, a glimmering of the truth? If she had, it must have revolted her.

"It would have been tolerant, m'lady," he said, "to have let me go—and come back. I would have gone of my own accord, without involving you and Lord Cedely."

"Without involving—what can you be thinking of? You go from our world to hers, that can be your affair. But to come back again to ours; it would be impossible. You're very presumptuous, Edward, to offer yourself as a link between our life here and the outrage of hers."

"I didn't see it so."

"You see it now." She tightened the long velvet stole round her shoulders. "I can't talk about it any more. It's too painful. I can still hope that tomorrow—— You're young. This could so easily be forgotten."

He sat in his room, as the fire died out and the chill of night crept

in. Did they really think that he didn't understand every word of their point of view? That he was not impressed by the cold, clear reason of their arguments? It was the very thing which made it so hard, to acquiesce all the time in his mind, to keep himself from saying, You're right! It's true—but! The impossibility of admitting their rightness and persisting in his defiance of it.

The voices of the day were very clear in his memory, and he went over and over their urgent phrases; then he took out Isobel's letter and read it again and again, until there was no doubt that her voice was the clearest of all. It seemed now as if he had been waiting all the years for her 'I need you!' Resigned to the half-life of never seeing her again, there had still been in him a hope never put into words; and now, almost independent of his will, it was clutching at its own fulfilment. To see her! To enter on some sort of life beside her! Lady Cedely had said, You're young. So he was—too young at thirty-four to live always frustrated the life of the middle-aged, watching other youth grow and fulfil itself. In his case this chance might mean completely throwing himself away, but it was the only chance, and he had to take it.

He couldn't go to bed. He went on making up the fire until the coal was gone, and then in the icy four-o'clock dark of the February morning he made tea, bathed, shaved, and waited for the day.

The house woke, roused itself impatiently with a sort of grumble, and smoothly fell into order; the order that Edward himself had created and maintained.

In the middle of the morning Guy rode up, called a boy to take his horse, and strode into the hall shouting, "Father!" His impetuosity was always a trial to the conventionally-minded James, who liked to receive and announce even the family.

An hour later he appeared in the dining-room, where Edward had just gone with the luncheon menus.

"Will you be staying to luncheon, Mr Guy?"

"I don't think so. Edward, I want to talk to you."

"Here?"

"If we shan't be interrupted."

"There's no reason why we should be, sir."

Guy shut the door. "My father telephoned me to come over. I've just been with him. I said I'd talk to you." His frank smile flashed, a little nervously. "Look, Edward, I think I can see what you're aiming at. It's your sense of fairness, isn't it? You've got some idea in your mind of being fair to Isobel, of not letting her down after what you did for me and Sonia and Matt. Well, it isn't on a par at all. You can't be fair to Isobel because she isn't fair to herself or to anyone else. It's all so mistaken. I gather my father was a bit heavy-handed with you. I couldn't be if I tried, but I can talk to you as man to man and stop you from making some damned awful error. How do you really feel about it?"

(How do I really feel about it? As though another storm was coming up to batter me. To go all through all this again with Guy, clear-sighted, fine, so tremendously liked and likeable!)

He said, "It would be better if we didn't discuss it, because I intend to go to her."

Guy's face was startled and exposed. "But my father says that if you do he won't have you back at Merryns! I'm afraid he means that."

"That's the worst part of it, but I can't help it."

"I can't picture Merryns without you, Edward—none of us can."

"I think we won't talk about that."

"I can't imagine you being so stubborn—so *impossible*. Of course, if you'd wanted to leave here in the ordinary way we shouldn't be having all this argument. We should just be very sorry, and have let you go. But you're making such a mad mistake—we can't simply stand by——"

"Please try and take it that I'm leaving—in the ordinary way."

"I shall not!" Guy broke out "I can't and won't let you go on with this without telling you a few facts. It's a hell of a thing to say about one's sister, but Isobel wasn't even decent. I found that out when I wasn't much more than a kid, and it messed up my mind for years. She used to sneak out at night to carry on with some village chap. They went in the old greenhouse by the fruit-garden. You know how Collis used to bring on some early sweet gooseberries there for a treat for Mother? I'd slip out after dark with a lantern sometimes and pinch a few. One night I barged in and found them there. I thought it was one of the maids. I felt awful. I was only about seventeen, and pretty innocent about such things. Then I saw that it was my sister. And perhaps the worst of it was to know afterwards that she knew that I knew, and yet she could go on laughing in my face." The line of his lips hardened painfully. "Well, there it is. You know too that there wasn't any faithfulness in her."

"I'm only going to be her servant, Mr Guy. Does the rest matter so much?"

"Oh God!" Guy flung round and dug his hands deep into his jacket pockets so that they stuck out stiffly on either side. "I've said too much already. I'm not fond of contention. If you feel like that you'd better damn well go. I've never been so sorry about anything in my life. Personally my inclination is to tell any man that he's at liberty to make a fool of himself in his own way, and I'll bear him no malice; but you must understand that *I'm with the family in this*. I stand by my father."

"Of course. I never expected anything else."

"When are you going?"

"That depends on the convenience of the house."

"I think my father would probably prefer that you went at once, unless by waiting there's still a chance——"

"No!"

To go, then, without good-bye. To leave Merryns, under a cloud, after twelve years. To receive the final heart-breaking indulgence from an employer of great dignity, a well-phrased testimonial to his years of service, and a generous gift.

"I can't accept this, m'lord."

"Put it on the fire, then."

He would have preferred a friendly, "Don't be a fool, Edward."

He dropped the cheque into the flames.

Chapter 6

I

ALL the way in the train he was wondering how she would look. Whether he would see her the minute the train drew in. Whether he was being altogether too presumptuous to imagine that she would be there at all. And what would she say when they met?

He still couldn't believe that he was on his way to her.

But he stepped out of the train on Middleham station, and there she was. She was not twenty yards away from him. She was looking the other way. He saw the trim line of her back in the close-fitting fur coat.

She turned, and her puzzled look changed to recognition.

"Oh, Edward!"

For an instant he couldn't speak. Then he said, "Good morning, Mrs Horland."

She looked more slender than he remembered her; fragile, though there was no suggestion of ill-health about her. He got the impression of a cultivated fragility, very soft and appealing.

Her hair was darker, shining with a more coppery gold under the small fur toque; her face was an elongated oval, the mouth a little wistful. The eyes, fringed with wet lashes, seemed too big for her face.

She slid her gloved hand into his and let it rest there.

"You've come! You've really come! Did you——" The whistle of the engine shrieked, drowning the end of the sentence. She screwed her face. "How I loathe railway stations!"

"In that case it was too good of you to come and meet me."

"As if I wouldn't." She used her voice like a musical instrument, keeping it low, with a soft, rich note when she laughed.

"But I came," he said.

"Do you know, right up to this very last minute I doubted. Quite honestly I didn't think you'd come. I didn't think they'd let you."

The smile ran tremulous round the corners of her lips, but her eyes were laughing. "You really are a wonderful person. All my troubles have disappeared."

She looked round. "Is that your luggage?"

"I'm afraid so. There's rather a lot."

He thought of what a terrible time he had had, packing. He had arrived at Merryns twelve years ago with everything he possessed packed in one Gladstone bag, but things had accumulated: books, clothes, bulky odds and ends.

She noticed the two corded wooden boxes.

"I suppose the cab driver can manage those. I came in a cab. The alternative was the open car, which I hate, or a smart spanking trap, which I hate still more. I seem to have got over any fondness for fresh air which I may once have had. Edward, did I say I was glad to see you? I am, you know. I'm so glad that it *stings*."

"It's wonderful to see you again, Mrs Horland."

"Don't call me that. Not from you! Call me Miss Isobel."

She led the way out to the cab and told the driver to fetch the luggage. He grumbled, but obeyed. Isobel took the grumbling calmly, as though she was accustomed to being served.

"Now we have about three miles to go," she said. "Did you leave Merryns this morning? But you couldn't, to get here so early."

"No, I left yesterday."

"Did they send any message for me?—I can see from your face that they didn't. No letter from Sonia, or anything? It's very unfair. You wouldn't be as callous to a dog, would you, as my holy relations are to me. Not that it worries me; I simply don't care. But it would have been rather awful if I had cared. I suppose the caring sort would have run back long ago bathed in tears of gluey repentance. God! Can you see me!"

Her laugh was a little too high-pitched. To Edward, her high spirits were inclined to be feverish.

She suddenly put her hand on his in a spontaneous intimate gesture.

"How do you think I look?"

"You look very pretty, but as if a puff of wind would blow you away."

"Oh? You mean, peaky and mingy?"

"No. I think the word is ethereal."

"Oh, Edward, what a beautiful word! Ethereal! It's lovely. I must tell Jack—that's my husband. He only knows words like mingy and peaky. Ethereal! I shall have to eat more. I think I shall want to, now that you're here. I haven't really eaten for days, not since I wrote you that letter from the heart. It really moved me, did that letter. I meant every word of it. Did you like my letter?"

"It told me you wanted me; that was enough, wasn't it?"

"It worked! And Jack is dying to see you. He thinks you must be so perfect that it terrifies him. He says, 'Thank heaven, now we shall have the house run properly.'"

"Is it a large house?" he asked, escaping the disturbance of intimate talk.

"It is, rather, but it was all we could get. I must have big rooms and spaciousness. The worst of it is, Edward, I'm such an awful, awful housekeeper. I've always taken smooth domestic arrangements for granted, and also I—I lived abroad for a time, where arrangements are different. I'm a useless person in practical matters. I've always had everything done for me. Well, now I can relax; everything's going to be perfect "

He couldn't believe that he was sitting here in the cab beside her, the fur edge of her coat lying across his hand, bringing her close, so that he wouldn't move his hand in case she suddenly disappeared.

He had pictured her in a hundred moods. Now here she was, gentle and somehow enchanted, just as he would have chosen to have her. And chattering away about herself like the old Isobel used to do, the Isobel he loved.

She looked out of the window and said, "Our stables are over there. Training stables, you know. My husband's passion. He thinks of nothing but horses "

"Do you still ride?"

"Strangely enough, I don't. I've given it up. I let other people ride the horses and try to talk intelligently about racing. You'll learn—in the intervals of coping with my awful servants "

"Why awful? How many servants have you?"

"Honestly I don't know." She put the back of her hand to her forehead and her eyes laughed beneath it. "I had a housekeeper, but she was impossible. I daren't tell her to go, and Jack had to, though he hated it and we had a row. We've had scores of cooks. I always thought that cooks could cook automatically, or why are they cooks? I found I was wrong. Now my own maid has left, and I can't find myself a pair of stockings. I keep seeing terrible maids on the stairs, and I suppose in some moment of madness I engaged them. I just keep on telling the registry to send more and more. Oh, it's been like a *zoo*, Edward!"

"You couldn't be expected to know about such things "

"Aren't you comforting? I'm going to turn everything over to you. You shall have a completely free hand, and make me a proper kind of house run like Merryns was run."

At the word, he felt the first pang for Merryns. It came to him unexpectedly, out of the blue, for up to now his mind had been so full of where he was going that there simply had not been room to think of what he was leaving behind. Now Merryns was beginning to take on in his mind the value of a lost and dear possession.

"I'll do all I can," he said. "It shouldn't be hard "

"I can't wait to get home and show you. And there's just one thing." Her tone changed. "You mustn't think of me as being anything but perfectly happy. I am—perfectly happy. I wouldn't change a thing. If I had it all over again I'd do the same. Do you understand?"

"At least I know what you mean."

She mocked him a little. "You just wouldn't commit yourself, would you?"

They came on the house suddenly; it stood only a little way back from the road, large and heavy in the ugly Victorian style of sham Gothic.

"This is Gimmell House," she said. "Not pretty. Don't be put off!" She went up the steps and opened the door with a key. She said, "I can't get used to this. I still think that doors should open silently as one approaches."

The large hall was gloomy, with a dark dado and sombre walls, and a high, smoke-blackened ceiling. The furniture was covered with dust-smears. In the grate was the remains of a dead fire, ashes scattered over the hearth.

"Enter!" Isobel cried gaily, but as she saw his look go to the disordered hearth, she frowned and sharply jerked the bell at the side of the fireplace. The long pause before it was answered was awkward; then the baize door at the back of the hall opened and a middle-aged maid in a soiled apron appeared.

"Yes, mum!" she said aggressively.

"Why has this fire been allowed to go out? Relight it at once!" Isobel's voice was shrill.

"That's nothing to do with me. It's not my duty, doing fires."

"Well, send the one whose duty it is!"

She smiled rather pathetically at Edward and lifted her hands in a helpless gesture.

"What a welcome for you! I'm so sorry."

"Oh please! It's just that you're not used——"

She gave him an amused, confiding smile. "I don't even know where you're going to sleep. You'll be able to arrange all that, won't you? Would you like to go and see, and then come to me in the morning-room, here?" She lifted her arms to take the pins from her hat, showing how delicate her wrists were.

Edward went through the baize door into a long passage with stained walls and a floor that was soft with months of dirt. At the far end an open door showed the kitchen, and there was a clatter of pans and of voices.

He stood in the doorway. "Good morning."

The cook turned round from the fire, and three maids drinking tea at the table stared at him.

"So you'll be the man who's come to put us all right!"

The cook spoke good-humouredly, without malice. She was a big-boned Yorkshire woman, and looked a decent sort.

"My name's Shrewsbury."

"And I'm Mrs Bradfield. Gertie, get Mr Shrewsbury a cup of tea, and be quick about it."

He took the cup gratefully, though the tea was slopped into the

saucer, for he had not felt like having breakfast; and stood at the side of the table drinking it.

"Sit you down. What's the matter with you?"

He felt embarrassed. The last thing he wanted was to appear stuck-up, but he had not been accustomed to sitting at the kitchen table.

When he had finished his tea, he said, "Madam asked for the fire in the hall to be relighted. Is anyone attending to that?"

A young girl with red cheeks and no cap said sharply, "She didn't ought to have let it go out. It takes me all my time lighting fires, never mind keeping them in."

"Are you the kitchenmaid?"

"What if I am?"

Edward went taut with anger, but said smoothly, "Go and tidy the hearth in the hall, and relight the fire. And you will call me Mr Shrewsbury."

An angry mutter went round the table, but the cook said, "That's right. A bit of discipline is what they want. Get on with it, Lottie."

The girl went out reluctantly, grumbling.

Edward smiled, for he wanted to show himself friendly. "Would someone mind showing me where my room is? I'd like to change and put my things away."

The cook and the elderly maid exchanged glances. The cook said, "I'll take you up myself, Mr Shrewsbury. I hope you haven't got ideas!"

"Ideas?"

"You'll see, your Royal Highness."

Edward fetched his bag, and they went up the back stairs, past the first and second floors, to the attics. Bare boards and a musty smell were evident. The cook pointed with her elbow at a door. "Gertie and I are in there, and the other girls opposite. This one's yours."

She pushed the door, and it flew open, for the handle was broken. Edward stood on the threshold concealing his shock. The room was no more than a walled-off end of the passage. Behind the door stood a huge gurgling cistern; it leaked with a regular plop into a rusty pie-dish. Above was a dirty skylight making the whole place dim. On the bare boards lay a strip of frayed matting, there was an iron bed with a stained mattress and pillow; a wooden chair. Not so much as a peg on the wall for hanging clothes.

"Home sweet home," said Mrs Bradfield.

Edward recovered. "Where can I find sheets and blankets to make up the bed?"

"Huh!" she said. "No sheets for the likes of us. There's only a dozen pair in the house, hand-embroidered ones for him and her, though I doubt if they're all there since that Mrs Ingram went off in a hurry. As for blankets, there's barely enough to cover me and the girls these cold nights. If I was you in your position I'd go down

and pinch a few of them good ones off the spare-room beds. I'm sure you're entitled to."

"Thank you, I'll manage," Edward said.

When the cook had gone he stood in the middle of the dreadful little room. How could he go downstairs and trouble Isobel about a thing like bed-linen? He had never expected anything like this. But had he really expected *anything* beyond being under her roof? It was enough that she had given him so warm a welcome, had been so genuinely glad to see him.

He began to change into his black clothes, white shirt and bow tie, laying his other things gingerly on the soiled mattress. There appeared to be nowhere to wash or brush his hair. No mirror. No chest or table on which to place the small folding one in his own bag.

"When he went back to the kitchen Mrs Bradfield said, "My! You do look a toff."

"I should have liked a wash," he said.

"I bet you would. Well, the girls and I come down to the sink, but you're entitled to something better, I'll agree. Lottie, it'll be your job to find Mr Shrewsbury a bowl and jug for his room, and see the jug's kept full. Did you get any blankets?"

"No, I——"

"Lottie, go up to one of the spare rooms and get a few of them blankets for Mr Shrewsbury. You did ought to have a chest of drawers too, but——"

"No, leave it, please, for the moment."

He went back to the hall. The ashes had been swept off the soiled tiles and a sulky fire burned. He tapped on the left-hand door, and, getting no answer, tried another.

"Come in!"

Isobel was sitting by the fire with a magazine on her knee.

"Oh, Edward, there you are. How nice you look! This is perfect."

"I was wondering about your luncheon, Mrs Horland. Do I lay it in the dining-room?"

"Oh no. My husband isn't coming in today, and I usually have a tray. Will you bring it in here for me?" She got up and began to arrange a bowl of early jonquils that stood on the table. "These are out of the garden, but it's such a wilderness. We have a gardener, but either he wasn't trained in the same school as dear old Collis at Merryns, or else he flinches from the unequal task. I'll have to learn some gardening myself. Have you been all round the house, Edward?"

"Not yet."

"Do go anywhere you want. I expect you'll think it's an awful muddle." She laughed, and added, "Do you hate me for bringing you away from Merryns? Don't rush back on the first disappointed impulse; I've got such faith in you."

"That's why I came."

"And I couldn't thank you in a hundred years."

He went back to the kitchen and found Isobel's luncheon tray already laid. Mrs Bradfield slapped down a plate.

"There you are. Run that in to her ladyship, and come back here for yours."

There was an underdone cutlet, a few greasy chipped potatoes, and a burst tomato.

"It doesn't look very dainty," Edward said.

"Dainty!" The cook fired up. "She's not an invalid, is she? If it's invalid cookery she's wanting she can find somebody else to do it. I'm not taking all that on too. My goodness! What next?"

He carried the tray in to Isobel and set it on the table, drawing a chair up.

"What are you having?" Isobel asked. "Can't you bring it in here and have it with me?"

"It would hardly look——"

"I suppose it wouldn't. I wish you could have come here as a friend——"

Edward ate his luncheon in the kitchen with the slovenly mards, who seemed to resent his presence, except for the youngest one, who saw herself as a charmer and flung him seductive glances as she knifed up her food.

In the afternoon he went to the dining-room and examined the appointments there. There was plenty of beautiful china and silver, though it appeared to be a long time since the latter was cleaned. He carried it all to the pantry next door and cleaned it. The pantry was large and had a gas-fire. He thought he might be able to make it into a sitting-room for himself.

When he went up to his horrible little bedroom again he found that somebody had tumbled a pile of fluffy new blankets upon his bed. He looked at them doubtfully, and turning round noticed that an up-ended sugar box was also there, bearing an enamel basin and a kitchen jug full of water.

The cistern gurgled like a drunken man, and the tin dish under the leak was full and dripping over. There did not seem to be anywhere to empty it.

When he served tea he found that Horland had returned home. He was a heavily-built man of forty with thick features and small, round, sad monkey eyes. His expression was pleasant; he seemed indolent and easy-going.

"Jack, this is Edward."

The man nodded, evidently well satisfied. "Glad to see you, Edward. I've heard enough about you, heaven knows. I hope you'll take the place in hand for us."

"I'll do my best, sir."

"I like the look of you. As for the other servants, I shan't blame you if you sack the lot."

Isobel smiled appealingly. She was wearing a clinging dress of black velvet, very tight in the skirt, as was the fashion, and her beautiful hair gleamed in its heavy coils.

"Have a cup of tea with us, Edward. Don't be stand-offish." She poured him a cup, and he took it and sat down by the table.

"Have you any improvements to suggest already?"

"Quite a number, but—I wonder if you would come round the house with me yourself? It would be easier."

"Of course," Isobel said. "We want to have some parties—guests to stay. Jack"—she turned to her husband—"you see the kind of tea-tray that Edward brings in. A pleasant change, isn't it?"

"Damn good! Yes, I should say, definitely sack the rest of the staff. I'll take you in to town tomorrow, Edward, in the car, and you can call at the registry and pick your own lot. Agreed?"

"If you wish, sir," he said hesitatingly.

He had hardly been in the house for half a day. He had not expected it would be like this, to have to embark immediately on an explanation as to why good servants would not look at the place in its present state.

"That's settled, then." Horland lit his own and Isobel's cigarette, and offered his case to Edward.

"No, thank you, sir. I only smoke a pipe, and not on duty. I ought to say——"

"Oh, Edward, you do look so uncomfortable. What's the matter?" Isobel's eyes were on him, lazily smiling up at him in that warm, enchanting way of hers.

"I was thinking, the cook seems a decent sort of woman, if——"

"If she could cook, you mean?"

"Not only that. I meant, she might help me in a drive to get the place cleaned up, before we engage a different lot of servants."

"But would a different lot of servants do better than these?" Isobel made a weary gesture and smiled at her husband. "What do you think of this, Jack? Me! Engaged in a most dreary domestic discussion. I can hardly bear it. Don't be too drastic with me, Edward."

"I'm sorry, madam." He felt unnerved. "But—have you seen the servants' bedrooms?"

"Have I—what!" Amusement, surprise, exasperation were in her voice. "Oh dear! Do you mean you don't like your bedroom? Well, change it for another—but really, Edward! Servants' bedrooms!"

"There is no other. I'm not complaining for myself, but I thought you should see——"

Horland interrupted. "What's the matter with the servants' bedrooms? I told the dealer to send up suitable stuff. Heaven knows we went to enough trouble fitting out this place——"

"It isn't the right time to discuss it," Edward said. "I'm sorry the

matter came up, but I think something should be done before new staff arrive, or——”

He got up.

“Of course,” said Isobel, “you must do whatever you think. You have an absolutely free hand. And you’d better put yourself into one of the spare rooms. Until we have the place full of guests, that will be quite all right.”

She smiled her delicate brittle smile; she looked as fine as spun glass, with her crown of dark gold hair.

“Very good, madam.”

“Oh dear!” she said. “Now you’re going to be formal, Edward. I really can’t bear it. Do try to like us a little! Are we asking too much of you?”

“Not at all. I shall do my best. It’s a little strange——”

“You mean, it isn’t in the least like Merryns. I couldn’t agree with you more. Jack, I believe he’s going to desert us and rush back to Merryns at the first opportunity. Darling Edward, don’t do that to me, I need you so badly.”

“I shan’t go back to Merryns,” he said.

2

“Mrs Bradfield, do you think you and I between us can induce these girls to get the house clean and keep it as it ought to be kept?”

The woman looked at him shrewdly. “The trouble is, Mr Shrewsbury, they won’t be spoken to, and they’ve got the idea that you’re here to push them about.”

“They’ve got the right idea. I am. You’ve probably been in good service——”

“I certainly have, and I never thought to come down to——”

“Never mind that.” He spoke a little too curtly, and she coloured up and set her lips. “I’m going to have this house clean and well run, and if they won’t do it I’ll get some servants who will.”

“Easy spoken,” she said. “Where are you going to get good servants who’ll stay in this pig-sty?”

Last night he had been too tired to stay awake, even on his shake-down of a bed, listening to the baleful noises of the dripping cistern. He had slept and his dreams had been fantastic, insane.

Isobel! Isobel! I love you and I hate you, and both are passions that so easily intermingle that I am always being torn apart. I came here not for my own sake, but for your sake. Remember! For your sake, not for my sake! What do I get out of it, get out of it, get out of it? Nothing, nothing, nothing. Never, never, never. I’ve given up everything, and you are my magic, my dream, my hope and my transport of joy; and you are my misery, and I’m bound to you and by you for as long as you want to keep me.

Isobel, we are in the woods at Merryns, and the shadows are blue,

and we are sinking down on the pine-needle carpet and your mouth is hot against mine, and heaven is opening for me.

The thunder comes, and Guy is in the old greenhouse with his lantern, and he cries out; and the white cruel horns are tearing at the thing on the floor, and it has no face left, and it is Will Hevon—and now—oh God, it is me!

Isobel, Isobel, you have been lying to me. I can always tell when you are lying, even when the affectation of truth is in your clear eyes. Couldn't you—just for once—reach out your arms to me, and let me feel your warmth? Couldn't you—just for once—give me my miracle, let me drown deep in peace?

Yes, yes! Now I have you, and you are possessed by me. The summer sky is full of larks, and I pull from the hedge a trail of wild white convolvulus and wind it round your throat, and you laugh up at me, and you say . . . "Now you're going to be formal, Edward. If you don't like your bedroom, change it for another."

There is no other. Why did I come to this hell? Why, of my own free will and accord, did I come to this hell?

I am trapped. The train is in flames. I am bleeding and soon to die, but she is near me, though I don't want to make love to her any longer. I don't even want to make love to her any more, only to feel her lean on me and say, "Darling Edward. Darling Edward, take my hair in your hands—my dark gold hair. I won't hurt you any more, not any more. I won't talk about sordid things if you will come and live with me—not things like the servants' bedrooms. That's all finished now, and we are perfectly happy, and we wouldn't change a thing. I will be near you, and I need you, and I have faith in you. Won't you have faith in me?"

I have faith in you, Isobel, Isobel. I have faith in you. I will do my best, and the dripping of water in my ears, and the noise is terrible, and I will never leave you, and I will never go back to Merryns.

I will never go back to Merryns.

It had all gone through his mind again just now, while he stood at the kitchen table, and perhaps he had closed his eyes for a moment and drawn his forehead into hard lines, for Mrs Bradfield seemed to be looking at him curiously.

He dragged his mind back to the moment.

"Mrs Bradfield," he said, "it's quite a problem, but I think we can tackle it together. I don't think you like pig-sties any more than I do." He gave her a winning smile, and she responded:

"That I don't."

"I've been upstairs. Dust and neglect everywhere."

"Well, I can't be expected to see to that."

"Of course not. But the maids are here to work, and as Mr and Mrs Horland intend to be out today, do you think we could first of all have the passage between here and the hall scrubbed, and the

walls washed down? It doesn't seem to have been done for a long time."

"We haven't got the right type of girls, that's the trouble. Good girls won't stay."

"I'm sorry about that."

"You'll see!"

"We'll have to make the best of the ones we've got. Do you give them the orders, or do I?"

"I'll tell them. It doesn't say they'll do it."

He went to the scullery, found a bucket to fill with hot water, soda, soap and a scrubbing-brush, and went upstairs to attack his own room. When he had finished it was at least clean, and three times as light, for blue sky showed through the skylight.

He came downstairs. Nothing had been done to the passage. He called the kitchenmaid and asked her why. She said sulkily, "We girls have got enough to do without mucking-out passages that haven't been done in years."

He said, "All three of you can take a week's notice."

"Thanks very much," she said. "It won't worry us."

He refilled his bucket, fetched more soap and soda, and began on the passage himself. In the middle of this toil he heard a bell ring in the kitchen, and the elderly maid passed him on her way to the hall. A moment later she returned and said spitefully, "Madam wants you."

He was taken by surprise, worried about his appearance. He pulled off the piece of sacking he was wearing for an apron and let it drop, rolled down his sleeves, and tried to straighten his hair with the back of his hand.

Then he went through

"Edward! What on earth have you been doing?" She was dressed for going out in a close-fitting blue coat and a large black hat.

He smiled. "You've caught me. I was doing a little necessary cleaning up."

"But you don't do that sort of work! Good heavens! I wouldn't think of letting you. Why don't you tell the maids to do it?"

"The maids are under notice, and are not being very helpful. But you wanted to see me?"

"Yes, I did. I want you to get ready and come out with us. We'll take you to see the horses. Never mind anything else—hurry!"

"I can't do that. I can't leave the house, Mrs Horland. I've too much to do."

She made a gesture of impatience. "But I don't want you to have too much to do! I want you to have a good time, and come out with us."

"Please!" he said. "Please let me get the place straight first."

"Oh, very well. Only I feel a beast, letting you work like that."

"Could I have a word with Mr Horland?"

"With Jack? If you like. He's in the morning-room. I'm so disappointed."

He said to Horland, "I've dismissed the maids, sir; they weren't up to their work."

"All right. I'll run you over to the registry tomorrow and you can get some more."

"It isn't quite as easy as that, sir. I mean—the servants' quarters are such that you wouldn't get really good staff to stay."

Horland flushed. "What's the matter with them?"

"I'd like you to come and see for yourself, sir."

"Not on your life! And for heaven's sake, don't trouble Mrs Horland. Do you mean you want new furniture and so on?"

"That among other things. There should be blankets and sheets too—many things."

"All right. Make me a list of what you want and I'll order them."

Edward's spirits lightened. "Thank you very much, sir. I knew I only had to ask."

He spent the rest of the morning making his list, which was formidable, but he did not feel there was an excessive item upon it. In the afternoon he finished the passage, and thoroughly scrubbed out his pantry. The gas-fire in its present state was no use, as most of the burners were broken. A great many door-handles were loose. He went round the house making a list of repairs to be done. The bedrooms were luxuriously furnished with new furniture and hangings. Isobel had a white bed made in the shape of a shell, and a thick white carpet covered with dusty footmarks. The shell-pink covers and curtains were already soiled. He made a note to clean the room himself tomorrow. One side of the room was filled with a long cupboard with sliding doors. The doors were open and he saw rows of dresses and coats, with many pairs of shoes below. He closed the cupboards, and, picking up a silk negligée from the floor, hung it on the back of the door.

There seemed to be plenty of furniture about the house—more than was necessary for the rooms. He carried a draught-screen and a small table down to the dining-room and screened off a corner. Then he went to the kitchen and said to the cook, "I've screened off a corner in the dining-room. I shall have my meals there in future, and one of the maids can serve me. Perhaps you'll arrange that we have the staff meals one hour before dining-room meals."

"Oh!" She put down her ladle with a thump. "So you're too grand to eat with us, is that it? We're not good enough for the Prince of Wales?"

His heart sank, for he guessed rightly that the maids had been getting her over to their side.

"You know it isn't that at all, Mrs Bradfield. It's customary for the butler to have his own place."

"Butler my foot! You're nothing but a kitchen porter in this

house, my lad, and that's all you'll ever be. I'm telling you. You can sweat your guts out, but you'll get no thanks from the likes of her, or him. And which of us do you think is going to cart dainty trays along passages for you? Me, I suppose? Well, think again."

"I'll come for my own food, but I intend to eat it in my own place. This house is going to make a start at being properly run."

She tossed her head. "Then you can run it without me. I've had enough. By the time *you've* got everything so grand *I'll* be nothing but dirt, so I'll get out when the going's good. I'll leave on Saturday—and there's four weeks' money owing to me. It's the first time I've been in a place where you had to beg on your bended knees for the money that's rightfully yours. You'll find out."

"There's no need to discuss that, Mrs Bradfield," he said, trying not to let her see that he was shaken by her last revelation.

Horland and Isobel came back for dinner. The hall was bright and the furniture gleamed. The hearth was swept and the fire blazing.

"Oh Edward! What a transformation! It looks lovely. Jack, doesn't everything look beautiful?"

"It certainly looks better," Edward said, satisfied.

"You've evidently got those lazy women working," Horland said.

The next morning Horland drove him in the car to York to the registry and left him there.

"Gimmell House" The woman in charge looked doubtful. "You say you're the new butler there? I'm afraid the place hasn't got a very good name. They've had crowds of servants in the last three months—some of my best—and they didn't bring good reports at all. They simply wouldn't stay."

"It's going to be different now," Edward said. "I'm going to have things regular."

She looked him up and down. "I must say you look the right kind of person. Well, I'll give you a chance. What do you want?"

"A really good cook. Two housemaids, a kitchenmaid, a parlour-maid, and an odd man."

She smiled. "You don't want much! But I'll do my best for you and send you some reliable people. See they're treated right!"

"I shall."

"What about wages? I've heard——"

"That will be all right. Mr Horland has given me a free hand, and he'll be willing to pay good wages to the right people."

"I'm glad to hear it," she said dryly. "The previous policy of that house seems to have been to get as much as possible for as little as possible."

His spirits clouded. He went out into the street, and having half an hour to spare, wandered into the cathedral, where he sat in a back pew of the nave, rapt, self-forgetful, in the presence of its awe-inspiring beauty.

He met Horland at the appointed place. "Got all that fixed up?"

"I think so, sir. They're going to send some people along. The woman seemed doubtful at first about conditions being right——"

"Conditions? What the hell do you mean?"

"I told her that everything would be suitable for good staff. Rooms and so on. And wages."

"Oh yes, that's all right."

"I've got a list of the furniture and so on, that you said you'd see to, sir "

"Let me look . . . I say! You don't want much, do you?"

"It's all quite necessary, as you'd see for yourself if you went round the staff quarters with me. I do wish you would."

"Heaven forbid! No, it's all right, I'll see to this. My wife has boundless faith in you. And now let's go and have a drink before we go home."

Isobel was in the highest spirits when she heard that new servants were coming, and made a joke of the terrible dinner that Mrs Bradfield sent up. She had discovered a new card game that required three players, and after dinner she insisted that Edward should join her and Horland in the drawing-room to play. It was all very merry, with the coffee and liqueurs, and at the end of the evening he found he had won fifteen shillings.

"You're too clever," said Isobel, laughing. "You always were. I should have known better than to play any game with you. Do you remember how we used to play on wet afternoons in the schoolroom at Merryns, and you always won?"

Edward nodded. He didn't want to think about Merryns.

"I'll have to give you an I.O.U.," Horland said gaily. "I haven't got that much cash."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," said Edward, reddening. "I don't want the money; it's only a game "

Horland stared at him. "You'll never get rich! Come along—take the I.O.U. You can wave it in my face after the National, when Count Marco wins."

"Oh yes, Edward," Isobel cried. "You must have something on our horses. One of them is certain to win this year."

"All right. I'll put the I.O.U. on Count Marco."

Horland chuckled. "Done in the eye. The biter bit! I'll make a note of that." He recorded the item in a small notebook. "Fifteen shillings on Count Marco to win. That goes on for you, and the present odds are 100 to 6. They'll soon shorten."

A few days later a van delivered furniture, carpeting, blankets, and other items for the servants' quarters. There was only about half of what Edward had asked for, but even that would make a tremendous improvement.

"I've half a mind to stay on," said one of the maids when she saw the new beds. She was the best of the lot, and Edward felt that he

could use her, so he said, "You can stay if you'll help me. I want the staff bedrooms to be thoroughly cleaned now. I'll work along with you."

She agreed, and they spent the whole day cleaning and scrubbing.

In the evening Edward said to Horland, "The servants are leaving tomorrow and the new ones are coming in. This is an account of the money that's owing to the ones who are going."

Horland scanned the list. "Good Lord! It's a packet. What's all this for?"

"Apparently some of them haven't been paid for three or four weeks. I suppose that was due to the general upset. It seems a lot, but it's owing to them."

Horland frowned angrily. "I suppose I'll have to settle it." He took out his sovereign purse grudgingly. "This'll just about break the bank."

Isobel giggled.

"Why don't you occasionally pay the servants?" he flung at her.

"Darling, you know I never have a penny. Oh, Edward, I expect you'll want some money too. Aren't we horrible not to think of it? Of course we'll pay you the same as you had at Merryns."

"There's plenty of time for that," he said in embarrassment. "I've only been here a week." He stretched the tired muscles of his back, for he ached all over after days of hard manual labour, but at least the place was reasonably ready for the new servants and he need not be ashamed to show it to them. After this, all would be easy.

Isobel's eyes rested on him gently. "You've had such an awful week, coping with us. I wonder you haven't walked out on us. Get the new servants in, and then we'll give you a treat. Jack, can't we take Edward out for a whole day and show him the horses?"

3

"Put the tray down here, and stay and talk to me."

Isobel was sitting in the summer-house when he carried out her tea. It was a lovely March afternoon, and in that sheltered corner of the garden the sun was as hot as in May.

She was sitting with her hands before her on the rustic table, a tangle of embroidery silks in front of her and a pile of magazines, but she was taking no notice of those.

"Edward, you don't look awfully happy sometimes."

He was startled.

"You're imagining things."

"I suppose you've been worried about all that horrible hard work you've had to do."

"That's all finished now. And we've got the new servants. They seem all right."

"If they come up to your standards, they'll do!" She gave him a

beautiful look; his mind reeled. "Are you sure I was only imagining that you didn't look happy?"

"Quite sure."

"I've had my ups and downs, you know; and I've come to the conclusion that you can be happy anywhere—if you've got the basic things you want. I feel it was right for you to come here. Do you still feel it was right, Edward?"

"I never felt any other way about it. I wanted to help you."

"I know you did. And you left all that nice comfort at Merryns just for me. Because I asked you to. It was so heavenly sweet of you."

"Don't talk like that. You only make me embarrassed."

She laughed

"You're one of those people who hate being thanked. But to go back to the vexed subject, sometimes when I've looked at you when you didn't know I was looking, I've had the idea that you were thinking about Merryns."

"I can't help sometimes thinking about Merryns."

"Oh, what a lot of meaning in one short sentence!" Her eyes had a far-away look. "I sometimes think about Merryns myself—not very often now. I'm afraid it only makes me angry. They'd no right to throw me off like that."

"It doesn't do any good to think about that," he said awkwardly.

"How right you are! It was my home, and I was fond of it—before it got too cramped to hold me. Not one of my family could ever understand that, and yet you understand me perfectly. That's what makes the bond between you and me. In a way, you belong to me more than you belong to them. That's funny. But I'm glad you belong to me."

Go on talking like that, he thought, and his heart seemed to turn over. You know you've got me, and I can't resist you. I never can. I've got no will of my own when you talk, my will's water.

"It's a good thing somebody has faith in me," she went on, "and I'm glad the somebody is you. It's an awful thing when nobody has any faith in you."

"Why should anyone not have faith in you?"

"I don't know a lot about faith. But I think it's an awfully good virtue or quality if it keeps you near me. Edward, I sometimes think I'm not a lot of good to anybody, not even to myself."

He smiled grimly

"There you go—talking about yourself! I warned you once. You will talk. You never mean what you say. A few weeks ago you said you were perfectly happy. Now you say you're no good to yourself."

"Oh, that's just me, talking nonsense. If I'm some good to you, that's all that matters. You've done such an awful lot for me already. Look how nice the house is now. You did that."

"It was a pleasure."

Her brows suddenly drew together.

"I'd better say straight out what's on my mind. I can't bear to think of you going back to Merryns."

He was taken quite by surprise.

"Is that what's worrying you?"

"Worrying me! All the time. I have nightmares thinking about it. I think, what on earth shall I do when Edward goes back to Merryns? And I go as cold as the polar night."

"You needn't be afraid," he said. "I'm not going back to Merryns."

Her eyes were suddenly immense and brilliant.

"Not ever? Oh, you can't mean that! Do you—really?"

"Yes, I mean it. I'll stay with you as long as you want me."

"But I'll always want you! What a wonderful thought! You'll stay with me always? Oh, I couldn't be so selfish. I'm not going to be selfish about this, even when it means so much to me. I'm sure you want to go back to Merryns really. You're just saying it to please me."

"I do mean it," he said.

"So you're offering your life to *me* now? Edward, it isn't fair. None of our family have been fair to you, and now I'm being most unfair of all. You never had any life of your own; I used to think that at Merryns, in my unselfish moments. You simply let the family eat you up. From your point of view it wasn't good enough, but you didn't seem to see it that way."

"I didn't look at it that way. I wanted to be with them, and now I want to be with you."

"Because you care an awful lot about me. Oh, I do feel so humble! It makes me feel so humble when people care about me, because I'm not the sort of person that I should care about, if I wasn't myself."

Her hands shook, and her lashes were wet.

She suddenly thought of the tea, which up to now she had not touched. She poured a cup and sat looking at it.

She said, "You could sometimes go there for a visit, to help them out, if ever you feel homesick for the place. I'd like you to go. They won't love me any more for appropriating you."

"I tell you, I am not going back to Merryns!"

He spoke so sharply, and there was such an unmistakable ring of pain in his voice, that she jerked her head up and stared at him.

"What's the matter? Edward, what happened at Merryns?"

"Nothing."

"That isn't true. Something happened. My God! I know now. You can't mean that my father gave you the sack for deciding to come to me? . . . He did! Well, of all the abominable filthy tricks."

"Don't talk like that. You're right, but I didn't want you to know. I'm sorry you read my thoughts."

Her eyes flashed.

"I'm glad I did. Now we know exactly where we stand. You gave up Merryns for me. I swear I'll make it up to you, Edward. You shan't be sorry. I'll never let you be sorry."

"I'm not sorry. And you are making it up to me."

She dropped her head.

"Oh, you make me quite ashamed. Run away quickly, before I weep or disgrace myself."

He smiled gently.

"Aren't we rather silly to get intense about something that's over and done with? I'm here, I stay here. That's understood."

She looked up, her dark eyes shining.

"Edward, you're laughing at me."

"Why shouldn't we laugh?"

"All right. If you can laugh, so can I. I've laughed my way through most of the situations that life has chucked at me. I've come a long way, but I'm still alive, and better off than I've been in years. Why should we bother about Merryns—as if it was some beautiful, unattainable thing? It's all clouded with injustice, anyway. Why shouldn't this house of mine be as good as Merryns ever was? Everything is working like a clock, thanks to you. We've got good servants. We have a party of guests arriving tomorrow. *And* we're all going to Aintree—you too! It's lovely, it's wonderful!"

She laid her white slim hand on his for an instant.

"I must go," he said. "I've stayed talking too long."

"Never too long for me."

He walked away across the lawn, thinking of all that she had said. He felt thrilled and shaken by what she had said, and yet as he walked he could see in his mind a picture of Merryns. The great façade of the house, the woods around it, the glowing gardens, and the lights in the windows at dusk of an autumn evening.

His heart was not so light as it might have been. In spite of all her protests, she did not really think of him—yet why should she? She took so much for granted—yet why shouldn't she?

He still occupied that horrible little attic because there was no other place for him, and she had not troubled to see for herself where and how he was housed. Her mother would not have left it so at Merryns. But Isobel had never been used to practical details. So, as always, he made excuses for her.

4

Next day the house was full of guests, and he was kept tremendously busy from morning till night; encouraging the less experienced servants, smoothing ruffled temperaments in the kitchen, making everything run on oiled wheels, trying to give Isobel the kind of house-party she had been accustomed to.

She appreciated his efforts. She said, "I should really lose my

head with all the organisation. I never knew what was involved in having a lot of people to stay. It takes a genius like you to cope."

"I hope everybody is satisfied," he said.

"Oh, they think we have a wonderful place here, and I tell them it is all thanks to you. They all look at you with wonder and awe. One of my friends will be trying to steal you from me before long."

He laughed. "You think they'll succeed?"

"Over my dead body!"

Some of the new servants were rather inexperienced, but they were at least willing. They did their work well and accepted his leadership. Later, however, there was some grumbling among them about lack of consideration from those they had to serve; luncheons casually ordered, prepared, and then cancelled; and late dinners which began at ten and went on till midnight.

After the precision and orderliness of life at Merryns, Edward was often worried by the general unpunctuality and disregard for order of the Horlands and their guests. He himself got little sleep. He carried all the responsibility, and even blamed himself for not being more accommodating.

"Bless you!" Isobel whispered after a particularly gay and successful party, the tips of her fingers against her lips. It made all his hard work and concentration worth while.

The guests themselves were a raffish crowd, characterised by over-heartiness and insecure social poise. They drank too freely, and their language was often more suitable for the stable-yard than the dinner-table.

Not Isobel's kind of people at all, Edward thought; and wondered at the grace and ease with which she mingled among them, even seeming to find delight in their company. Perhaps it was because they made a sort of queen of her, the women fulsomely admiring and flattering her, the men completely bowled over.

She shone among them. She capped all their remarks with even sprightlier ones. Her dresses were always a little more rich, sophisticated, and daring than those of the other women.

The food was over-lavish and there was terrible waste in the kitchen, joints of meat hardly touched being thrown away daily. It worried and shocked Edward, but he had no time to deal with the matter, nor dare he risk upsetting the cook by interfering in what she considered her province. Actually the woman was hardly to blame, for she worked desperately hard and had not time to be careful.

"This is the worst lot I ever worked for," she would say. "Let's hope the tips are as big as the trouble they give. And let's hope they remember that there are people below stairs as well as the ones who help them on and off with their coats"—this with a darting glance at Edward.

Meals in the bedrooms. Tea in the garden and the drawing-room simultaneously, and going on from four till six or later. Drinks all

over the place and at all hours. Bells. Bells. Bells. Rushing maids with caps awry. Edward soothing ruffled feelings.

The talk was of nothing but horses and stable matters. On the day of the Grand National they all left early for Liverpool in a fleet of cars, taking Edward with them. They lunched at the Adelphi. Isobel placed him beside her.

She was in the highest spirits.

"Edward, this is a great, great day for the Horlands. You've got to put all you possess on Count Marco. He's the most perfect steeplechaser that ever set a foot on the turf."

"Listen to her!" said Horland. "Much she knows about racing." His monkey eyes rested on her proudly, for she looked very beautiful, and glances from neighbouring tables were directed to her.

"But, Jack, I've heard you say it yourself."

"Well, don't tell the world."

He looked confident, ordering lavish food and drink.

"I must say, the going is just right for my two. All I wanted was a drop of rain to suit Bridal Moon. Well, let's get along to Aintree early; I have a lot to see to."

For Edward the rest of the day was thrilling. From the moment the horses came out Isobel was clutching his arm in almost hysterical excitement.

"I can't bear it. Oh, aren't they beautiful? I think the most beautiful thing in the world is a race-horse. There they are! Nine and thirteen. Thirteen! Now why on earth would they have to give us thirteen?"

"Some people think it's a very lucky number," said one of their party.

"Do you think our jockeys look rather small and insignificant?"

There was a burst of laughter. "That's how jockeys ought to look."

"Thank you for telling me. I wouldn't have known."

"They're off!"

She shut her eyes. "Tell me when it's over."

"You can't keep your eyes shut for twenty minutes, Isobel!"

"Oh, can't I?"

Alas for the Horland hopes. It was an afternoon of disaster; sheer bad luck.

Bridal Moon ran out on the second round. Word came along the course that Count Marco had fallen at Becher's Brook; injured his jockey; had had to be shot.

The party came back despondent, for everybody had lost money. Horland himself was in a state of abject gloom, his monkey face quite grey; and, like many heavily-built men, he seemed to shrink and droop when his spirits were low.

Dinner at Gimmell House was like a funeral party.

"Can't everybody buck up?" cried Isobel brightly. "What's a

loss of two horses? You racing people! The flat season opens in about five minutes, and then we're going to have a wonderful success."

But Horland refused to be cheered. He was more heavily committed than anyone knew, and had been counting on this race to get him out of a nasty financial situation.

Some consequences of this showed themselves at the end of the week.

The cook said to Edward, "I warn you, some of us will be leaving Saturday unless we see our wages."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say."

"Surely Madam pays monthly?"

"Well, even if she does, we've been here six weeks, haven't we? You'd better see about it, Mr Shrewsbury."

"I've never had anything to do with the wages," he said. "I thought——"

"You thought!" She faced him aggressively, hands on hips. "When has Madam ever showed her face in this kitchen? Or when has she ever sent for me, or shown that she knows I exist? A word of thanks to the cook doesn't come amiss. But she! She wouldn't know me if she met me in the street. Much she cares—except for having a new dress on every time she goes out, a new hat, a new bit of jewellery worth I don't know how much. I've seen her, and the maids can talk. Fine food and drink flowing regardless; clothes ordered, but wages owing to the servants that do her work, oh no! That wouldn't enter her ladyship's head. I know the likes of her, I've come across them before. It's my belief that nothing in this house is paid for. As for him——"

There was a cold lump in Edward's throat.

He said, "Don't say any more, Mrs Squires. I'll speak to Mr Horland, and the matter shall be put right at once."

"You can talk!" said the cook. "Well, we'll hope. But if it isn't——"

Edward waited until after dinner, when Isobel and Horland had gone into the drawing-room.

"Can I have a word with you, sir?"

Horland said morosely, "What is it now?"

"It's about the servants' wages."

"The—what? Oh God, why do you have to worry me with a thing like that? I've got enough on my mind. You're supposed to run the house. Let 'em wait."

Edward's anger boiled.

"They've waited a long time already. They've had no money for six weeks. I'm afraid if they're not paid they'll go."

Isobel looked frightened.

"Jack, they mustn't go. You'll have to——"

"Be quiet!" said Horland. "I don't know what servants are coming to, so damned independent. Can't you put them off a bit, Edward?"

"Put them off? For how long?"

Horland gave him a brooding, sulky look.

"Look, Edward, I'm not wanting to be difficult about this, but the fact is that everything has fallen on me at once. These things happen. I'm stuck for money myself. Can't you explain to them——?"

"I'm sorry, Mr Horland, but I can't put them off any longer. It isn't fair to them—or to me, if it comes to that."

Isobel looked anxious. "Oh dear, we always seem to be talking about servants' wages."

Horland cursed and slumped down in his chair.

"How much do they want?"

Edward showed him the list he had made, and the total.

"So much? It's fantastic."

"It's six weeks' money for each of them. It wouldn't seem so much if it was paid weekly, as it should be."

Dark blood rushed to Horland's face.

"Are you telling me how to run my house?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I shouldn't have said so much."

Isobel sat twisting her hands.

"I think money is beastly," she said. "So sordid. It spoils everything. And we were having such a lovely time." She got up and left the room quickly.

"Go away," said Horland to Edward. "I'll have to think. Perhaps I can do something. Come back in half an hour."

He went to his pantry and made a cup of coffee, adding a teaspoonful of brandy. He carried this up to Isobel's room.

"Come in!" The tone was doleful.

She was sitting on the edge of the bed, in a welter of dresses, hats, scarves, and lingerie, for she had no maid, and she never put anything away.

"Oh! Is that for me?"

"I thought you might like it."

"Sweet of you." She took the cup, and her lovely, dark-shadowed eyes brimmed over.

She said, "You mustn't mind Jack. He's very upset just now about money. He was expecting a lot of money he didn't get, and he's worried. He didn't mean to snap at you."

"I spoke rather hastily," Edward said. "I provoked him."

She sipped the coffee.

"It's just my awful luck. Fate is absolutely against me. I wanted to have everything perfect, and now it's all spoiled, and I can't do anything about it."

"There are things you might do."

There was a quick gleam of interest on her face.

"What do you mean?"

"I was thinking," he said, "of the first day when I came to Merryns, do you remember? Twelve years ago. You met me, and you told me that your mother had hurt her ankle by falling over the scullery step. It seemed a funny thing to me that a lady of her rank and position should even know she had a scullery, much less visit it. But when I knew Lady Cedely, and knew Merryns, I understood. There wasn't a corner in her house that she didn't visit, to see it for herself. There wasn't a servant that she didn't know personally, and they were all free to talk to her. That was the secret of the perfection that was there."

"Oh, heavens, I'm not Mother! Are you suggesting that I should go poking about this house and interfering with the servants? Oh, Edward! Can't you see to all that?"

"I wasn't suggesting anything," he said. "I was only telling you what was done at Merryns."

"And comparing Merryns with this hateful place? No, I didn't mean that. Oh, but you put me in a hole. Do you really think things would be any better if I took myself along to the kitchen and let them all stare at me? They'd be even more embarrassed than I would. And what should I say?" She gave a nervous giggle. "'I hope you are all very well, and do tell me if there's anything about the place you don't care for!'" "

He did not smile, but said gravely, "You might do worse than say just that—for a beginning."

Her eyes filled again. "I can't do it. I feel too miserable. Couldn't we wait until Jack gets some money, and things straighten out again? Then I'll try—I'll do anything you say. I'll make everybody feel at home, and I'll even fall down the scullery step, just like Mother. But, please, not when I'm feeling so low! I'm not in the mood to be gracious."

"I wasn't asking you to do it now," he said gently. "I didn't want to seem demanding. But the servants feel there is a gulf between you and them, and it doesn't help them to give their best and be loyal."

She picked up a scarf from the littered bed and wiped her eyes on the silk.

"This is all getting so heavily domestic—so sordid. I didn't think it would be like this when you came. I thought we should have had wonderful times, and all that happens is rows about wages, and being hard up, and why aren't I more like Mother."

He tried not to let her see that she had hurt him, but her own perception told her that, and she said quickly, "I'm talking like a sulky child. Don't let me, Edward. Hit me, or something, when I'm such a beast." She lifted her eyes to him with a soft expression, searching his face. "The last thing I would ever do or say is a thing that was unfair to you."

"I know that. Please forget everything now—everything we've said, until a more favourable time. I'm sure it's going to be all right."

He left her, and went back to the drawing-room.

Horland was sitting where he had left him, reading the evening paper. He seemed calmer.

"You told me to come back, sir."

"Yes. Well, about this business—the total sum is out of the question, I can't do it." He sat without speaking for a minute, then reluctantly he put his hand into his pocket and brought out his sovereign purse. "We'll have to compromise. Here——" He tipped up the purse and six sovereigns fell out on his hand. "That's all I've got on me, you can see for yourself. Take it, and give them all a bit on account. That's the best I can suggest. Tell them I'll settle up the rest next week. That should keep them quiet."

"I'll do what I can, sir," said Edward, without enthusiasm.

5

A bit on account.

A bit on account to keep the servants quiet. A bit on account for the tradesmen, who, though they did not see much prospect of getting the huge sums owing to them, would not willingly forgo the big orders from Gimmell House. A bit on account for the furniture people, and the carpet dealers, and the providers of this and that luxury

A bit on account for Isobel's milliner, and the jeweller, and the furrier. Keep them quiet; put them off. Next week. Next month. When the flat racing gets under way, and we land a packet of money.

By June the servants were leaving, some of them in tears without their money, carrying shocking reports back to the registry, which refused to supply any more maids to Gimmell House.

"In that case," said Isobel, "you'll have to try another registry, Edward. I believe there's one at Ripon."

"How can I?" he said. "It puts me in a dishonest position."

"Oh dear, don't talk like that. It makes you sound so noble, and me such a fraud." She laid the back of her hand against her forehead, a touching, distracted gesture. "I know how you feel, but it's so impossible. Every time you look at me you have that 'running fast to ruin' look on your face. It can't really be as bad as that. I know I can't expect you to have any faith left in me, but I do need you so. We're going through a dreadful time. It isn't really Jack's fault; he was just over-confident, and his luck has been quite deplorable. I can't bear to worry him, so I bottle up my feelings, and then confide in you—which is awful for you, but so comforting for me. The horses are doing well now, but it doesn't seem to ease the situation. These horrid debts are like a mountain. But even a mountain can be shifted if one goes on shovelling away. The luck is bound to turn;

it always does if you hang on long enough. Edward, do be clever, and find a way."

He listened to her specious pleading, sick with pity for her, knowing that his life was bound up with her and that whatever happened he would go on striving, using himself for her.

"I don't see there's anything I can do, with things in their present condition," he said. "One thing's obvious, we can't go on as we are. If you'd let me make a suggestion——"

"Yes, yes?" Her lips parted eagerly.

"I was only going to say, couldn't we move into a smaller house and have less to keep up, fewer servants, until things right themselves? If necessary I'd do all the work myself, if there was someone to cook."

She set her lips and her face clouded.

"I don't think I should like that. I wouldn't like that at all, and neither would Jack. I do think it is essential not to take a downward step. It gives such a bad impression, like losing face. I think we must try and hang on. We like this house, and everything is bound to come right soon. Then we shall have fun again, with lots of parties, lots of friends, and everything going well at the stables. Edward, do you think for the time being—if we are very careful and don't do any entertaining—that you and Mrs Squires could manage alone? Is that an awfully presumptuous thing to ask? I mean, we could probably pay the two of you without any difficulty."

"We could try it and see," he said. "Pay Mrs Squires in full. It doesn't matter about me. I have money saved from Merryns, and I never spend anything. If she can cook, I'll do the rest of the work."

He did not add that he had never received a penny since he came to Gimmell House. It would have raised a barrier between himself and Isobel's confidence. It would not occur to her to enquire if he was paid.

Horland grumbled, but accepted the new arrangement as inevitable, and the household ran on meagrely.

The cook, assured of her money, did such work as she was compelled to, and spent the rest of the day lazing by the kitchen fire.

Edward worked a sixteen-hour day. In return for this he received constant expressions of gratitude from both Horland and Isobel, who now treated him more as a friend than a servant.

His position in the house had changed. There was no formality. He ate his meals with them, waited on all their needs, and generally smoothed their way.

Horland was usually morose and gloomy, but his devotion to Isobel was apparent. He seemed to rely on her cheerfulness, and with the summer days her natural vivacity asserted itself. She was gay and talkative. She refused to discuss what she called 'horrid things'. She flung smiles and gaiety about, and wore her loveliest dresses.

Every time Horland came into the house he would call, in sharp agitation, "Isobel! Isobel, where are you?"

And when she appeared, with her cool, "Here I am. What's the matter with you, Jack?" and her small, amused, deprecating smile, relief would flood over him like waves flowing up the sands, as though in some deep, tortuous place in his heart he had feared she might not be there.

To Edward, worried as he was and over-worked, there was something pathetic in the way the man hung upon her, drawing such strength as he had from her uncurbed vitality.

So she has two men upon her hands, Edward thought. Two of us! And both kept up by our faith in her.

One night the doorbell rang. A young man was standing on the steps. It was Bartholomew Lintern.

"Edward!" His hand shot out in an enthusiastic clasp. "I'm so glad to see you. How are you?"

"Barty! Is it really you?"

He laughed. "Aren't you going to ask me in?"

"Of course. I was so surprised and pleased to see you I didn't know what I was doing."

"I've come out of my way on purpose to visit you," said Barty, stepping into the hall.

"Mr and Mrs Horland are out. They won't be back until late."

"Horland? Oh, of course. Isobel I don't seem to be able to keep up to date with her names"

It was the old gay, friendly Barty, like a visitor from another world.

He said, "I say, Edward! You look thin, not yourself at all. Don't they feed you here?"

"Don't be absurd"

"It's a lovely evening Can't we walk out of doors? I haven't long to stay"

As they walked through the lanes between the honeysuckle hedges he said, "I've always promised myself that I'd come to see you. It knocked me flat when I heard what had happened at home. It was such an awful shame. I've missed you terribly."

"I've missed you. How is everybody at Merryns?"

"Very well. Sonia is there. I told her I was coming to see you, and she sent her love."

Edward's face lighted. "Will you thank her—very much? It was the worst thing to me, not to be able to say good-bye to you."

"There isn't any question of good-bye! Surely something can be arranged. I haven't any intention of letting you go."

"You don't know how happy it makes me to hear you say that."

"How long do you intend to stay here?" Barty asked.

"To stay? Oh, indefinitely."

"Oh. You mean you're settled here—with Isobel?"

"Quite settled."

Barty made an exclamation of discontent.

"I suppose you know your own business, and it's your life. I'm not going to ask questions. I never do. I hate the word *Why*, or any kind of intrusion into another person's private motives, so we'll have to leave it undiscussed. But I tell you, the whole thing has been a trouble to me, Edward. You and I were such friends, and I mean us to go on being friends."

"I hope we shall."

"It's a pity you're so far away," Barty said. "I'm in London at present. I'm helping a friend of mine, a priest in a very poor parish. It's only a temporary arrangement, until I take Orders myself, but I feel I'm doing a bit of good and not wasting my time. This is my holiday. Do you ever come to London? Surely Isobel gives you some leave."

"I'd love to come and see you in London," Edward said eagerly. "I'm sure it could be arranged. Perhaps in the autumn, if only for a day or two."

"That's good news; we'll consider it settled. I'll give you my address and wait until I hear from you. Don't let me down! Make it as soon as you can. We shall have all the time in the world to talk when you come."

"Can't you stay tonight?"

"It's not possible. Will you make my apologies to Isobel? Is that in order? What's her husband like?"

"They seem very happy together."

"Well, I'm tolerant. People of our generation can't keep up an attitude of eternal disapproval and condemnation, like the older ones did. Give her my love."

"She'll be pleased at that."

"I never knew Isobel very well. I was a child when she was grown up. Guy and Sonia are dead against her, but I'll always take her as I find her. Tell her that, if it'll do any good."

"I wish you could stay and see her."

"I simply cannot. I'm with a friend at a country pub about two miles from here, and we're moving on first thing tomorrow morning. I can't stay long enough even to talk to you about all the things that come crowding into my mind. They'll have to wait until next time. But I seized the chance of seeing you, and I'm delighted that I did. It has been so worth while."

"You can't be more delighted than I am, Barty."

The brief visit had cheered Edward beyond words and made all the difference to his frame of mind. To have renewed his friendship with Bartholomew, his link with the family, and to know that he was not forgotten seemed to stabilise his present rather rocky position and give him radiant hope of future meetings.

When Isobel came back he said, "Who do you think has been here? Barty."

"Barty! What made him come?"

"He was spending a night with a friend nearby, and called."

"Did he ask about me? Did he intend to stay?"

"He couldn't stay. He asked me to make you his apologies and he sent you his love."

"He did? Really?" There was light mockery in her voice, but Edward could tell that she was pleased.

"He's living in London. He wondered if I could have leave in the autumn to go and spend a few days with him."

"But of course!" Her eyes widened. "Oh, how thoughtless I've been. I've never given you any time off at all. How will you ever forgive me? But you shall go to London; you shall have a week—a fortnight, a real holiday. I owe it to you."

She and Horland were due to leave next day with the horses for Epsom, Newmarket, and a round of southern race meetings.

Edward found her struggling with the unaccustomed task of packing.

"Can't I give you a hand?"

"Oh, do it all. Please! I'm hopeless."

"I've never dealt with women's dresses before."

She began to laugh. "Oh, push them in—throw them in. All these shoes!" She wandered about the room singing a popular air. "Edward, between you and me things are soon going to be wonderful. Don't take any notice of Jack's gloom. He's got into the way of being gloomy. I hate people who pretend they have things on their minds. It's just a bad habit."

"I hope you'll have a successful time at the races," Edward said, dragging straps tight.

"We shall. Nothing surer! We have the darkest horse that ever astonished the world. Someday I shall astound you with the news that we're completely solvent, all these disgusting creditors paid; and then what times we'll have! You'll see."

Horland next morning did not seem to share her optimism. He was irritable while Edward assembled the luggage in the hall.

"What do you want all that for, Isobel? It's ridiculous."

"But I need it. We're not going to stay in the slums, are we? We're not going to dress like tramps, are we? If you look rich, you are rich. Everybody knows that."

"Well, we're not going to stay in any place where you can dress like a queen, I'm telling you now. We've got to cut our coats according to our cloth."

"Oh! That from you? Oh, Jack, and you always used to say that only the best was good enough. You need a drink, we all do. Edward, we'll have champagne, and don't tell me there isn't any left!"

He brought a bottle and opened it. Isobel filled the glasses brim high, and passed one each to the two men.

"This is nonsense," said Horland.

"It isn't nonsense. I can't stand being dismal about nothing. Edward, drink to our luck! Here's luck for us—and here's to our next merry meeting." Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes brilliant, her teeth flashed between laughing lips. "Oh, the bad, wicked girl!" she said. "Such wasteful extravagance on the verge of roo-in."

He waved them off from the door, relieved to see her go in such good spirits, and not sorry for his own part to be free for a little from the over-intensified atmosphere of their daily living.

In the kitchen the cook was doleful.

"All it says in the papers," she observed, "is that they're thinking of having a war. Sickening, I call it. South Africa all over again, that's what it'll be. That's where I lost my man, or I'd have been comfy now in a home of my own, instead of working my fingers to the bone for folks without any gratitude."

"You never do anything but read the papers. Why do you do it, if it upsets you so?"

She got up.

"I suppose I'll have to see about some lunch for you and me. Thank goodness we'll have a bit of peace now *they've* gone. But between you and me, and putting two and two together—as I've always been very good at doing—I don't see this set-up lasting long. If his lordship doesn't get half a dozen writs served on him before he's much older, my name's not Gladys Squires. Then it'll be a County Court case, and bang goes everything"

He was shocked at the outrage of her words

"Don't talk about things you don't understand."

"You'll see," she said shrewdly. "You'll see"

6

He remembered her words when it happened.

Bang goes everything!

The writs, and the County Court case, bringing them back pell-mell from the south; Horland dour, tight-lipped, with miserable monkey eyes. When it was all over Isobel wept angry tears.

"We've lost everything—everything. Oh, Edward, what are we going to do now?"

"Perhaps it isn't as bad as you think. Things never are."

"Aren't you the comforter! But this is the awful, ultimate end. I let you in for this, Edward, when I made you come and share my life."

"I came of my own free will, didn't I?"

She was quite hysterical, simulating tragic despair.

"It's absolute ruin. I don't know what's going to happen to us now. Jack is shattered. I ought to be downstairs telling him that everything is all right and I'll stand by him to the end; but I'm only thinking of myself." She caught his hand and turned her face

against his sleeve. "I'm a bad wife, I'm a bad everything. I just give way." She began to cry again, he could even feel the wet soaking through his sleeve.

"It's all right, it's all right," he kept saying. "It can't be so bad."

"I expect you think I'm to blame for being extravagant and thoughtless."

"It's silly to start thinking about who's to blame. Stop crying. Stop crying, Isobel! It isn't like you."

"Oh, but I'm in the depths—the utter depths."

He gently lifted her off his arm.

"Nothing's worth spoiling your face for. You can laugh even this off. It's like a scene out of a farce; you crying in the butler's arms and poor Mr Horland downstairs drinking the brandy——"

She quivered all over, and suddenly raised her head. Her eyes were laughing.

"It would be a pity for me if I hadn't you to cry on, Edward. So we're going to be sold up! What happens next? I haven't any experience of such a situation."

"You start a new life—all over again."

"Do we? It sounds as though there might be something in it. Poor Jack! He'll take to it even worse than I do. I've had crises in my life before—you know, pack the bags and run! I always think it's the end, and really it's a new beginning. Oh, you have cheered me up."

She began to straighten her hair with her hands, and then smoothed her cheeks, which were little ravaged.

"What sort of a new beginning will it be? Miserable poverty, of course, to start with. I expect that Jack must get work as a stable-boy, and I'll be a washerwoman, and you shall run the squalid hovel for us."

He said seriously, "You'd better go down to Mr Horland, Isobel. He takes things hardly, you know."

She looked alarmed.

"Oh God! You don't mean he'd—nothing like that!"

"Well, say the right thing to him. Give him some encouragement. Perhaps he's feeling that he's let you down."

She nodded.

"I didn't look at it like that, but you're right. Thank you, Edward. You're always right."

He went down to the kitchen. The cook was standing there with her outdoor things on.

"Well," she said, "I'm off. There's nothing for the rat when the ship sinks."

"Mrs Squires! Please——"

"It's no good. All the soft soap in the world won't keep me here—not with the *Honourable* Mrs Horland. That's not going to do me any good when I go for another situation. So I'll thank you to go and ask her for my wages."

"How much is owing to you?"

"One pound, if you please."

He felt that he could not interrupt Isobel or Horland at this moment with such a request. He found a sovereign in his pocket—one of his quickly dwindling savings—and gave it to the woman.

"Here you are."

"Thanks. I've corded my box, and I'll tell the railway to call for it. So long, Mr Shrewsbury. You look after yourself; that's my final warning to you. If you don't, nobody else will."

She had left a meal prepared and he served it. After he had made coffee, he told Isobel that the cook was gone.

She received the news sombrely. Her new cheerfulness in the face of disaster seemed to have evaporated since her interview with Horland. Evidently she had not liked what he had told her.

The next few days dragged by. Edward kept out of their way, serving such meals as he could prepare, leaving them to themselves.

It was plain that Horland was thinking furiously and that plans were being made, for on one or two occasions when Edward went into the room where they were, a too-sudden silence fell, showing that their discussion was not intended for his ears. He felt that it was right that it should be so. They had to find their own way out of the tangle of their affairs.

Then a new tension seemed to grow; there was a constraint which he had not sensed before.

It was apparent that Isobel was avoiding him, and he could not for the life of him think why. Horland was drinking too much; so was she, and it was not her custom to do so. Whenever he came into the dining-room they would be drinking; talking earnestly, and drinking. Since the crisis he had not taken his meals with them. He had to keep running backwards and forwards to and from the kitchen, and it was easier to serve them and eat by himself.

They took to sitting on for a long time at the dining-room table, and Isobel would light cigarette after cigarette, throwing them away half-smoked.

Edward began to wonder when she would tell him what was wrong, and what they planned to do. For of course she would tell him, and it was certain that a plan would have to emerge quickly.

What he did not dream of was that when she finally got round to telling him, she would not face him alone, but would shield herself by Horland's presence.

It came one evening just after he had cleared the table. He could feel the tension as Isobel leaned forward, her arms on the table, her fingers interlaced.

"Edward?" she said.

There was a hard silence.

Horland said, "Well, go on. Are you going to do it, or shall I? I don't know what you're making such a fuss about."

"Edward——" she said.

An icy shiver of premonition ran from the centre of his body along his nerves.

"We've had to come to a decision," she said. "It's the only possible thing. We're going away—to America."

"To America?"

"Yes, and"—now it was coming in a rush—"you must understand, we only wish we could have taken you with us, but——"—her eyes flew to Horland for prompting, and they exchanged a meaningful look—"but, you see, it isn't as if we had anywhere definite to go. I mean, it will be hotels, and so on. You do understand?"

"Of course."

In every quivering nerve he understood; how she had no more use for him, how she was getting rid of him and priding herself on the way she was handling the situation. The awful thing was that he knew this wasn't even hurting her—not hurting her at all. There was nothing behind her wide, serious, solicitous gaze but relief that the thing was said, that he was taking it so calmly, that she was sliding out of any responsibility towards him, sheltered and backed up by Horland's presence and approbation.

She took a reviving breath, and said, "We've been so grateful for the way you've stood by us, haven't we, Jack? You've been——"

"No, really—please. That's quite unnecessary."

"Oh but—it's so good of you to understand——"

She was confident now, poised and smiling.

"When do you expect to be leaving, Mrs Horland?"

"That's another thing. Actually it's rather soon. We shall have to get away from here tomorrow. Nothing here belongs to us any more, you know."

"I see. I can easily make my own arrangements."

"I do think it's wonderful of you to understand," she said. "You'll be all right, won't you, Edward? I mean, you can——"

"I shall be quite all right. Is that all?"

She gave him a puzzled, reluctant look as he left the room. He knew that she would come after him. He knew that she hadn't quite finished, that she would have to make some more excuses before she would have satisfied her own peculiar brand of conscience; above all, would for her own self-satisfaction have to try to convince him of her true regret. She would always want to stand well with him, even at the end, leaving no suspicion of insincerity in his memory of her.

But nothing she could say would alter the fact that in one revealing instant he had seen through her, had recognised that she was throwing him off as she had thrown off others; as in the bottom of his heart he had always feared that she would.

She came into the hall, her eyes wistful, her fingers playing with her pearl necklace.

"This is awfully sad, Edward."

"Sad! Why sad? Life has got to go on."

"That's just it. Perhaps in America——" A bright thought spun into her mind. "We might even send for you some day. Yes! That would be——"

"You just thought of it," he said. "You'll never think of it again." She gasped.

"Edward! You don't realise how sorry I am. You don't know how bad I feel about it—that we've got to part."

She flung him her most appealing look. For one mad moment he thought he was Hugh Mannot. Just such a scene must have taken place. He could hear her saying those very words to Hugh, in just that wrung tone of voice. . . . "I'm so sorry. You don't know how bad I feel about it—that we've got to part."

And how many times had she said it since? Since she walked out on Mannot years ago?

He wanted to shout at her, "You must know such phrases off by heart by now!"

"I'm going to pack," he said. "Good-bye, Isobel."

"Oh, but you—when are you leaving? You'll see me again. It isn't good-bye yet——"

It's good-bye, he thought. I'll never see you again. Never again.

In his attic room he began to pack a bag. He was beyond all thought and feeling. He was burnt out, burnt to ashes, and there was nothing left to kindle that which within him had flared so quickly to meet her flame. Life itself had departed, leaving a vacuum of thought and desire.

His hands crammed the bag full, in feverish haste. The two wooden boxes of books and other possessions were still standing stacked in the corner; he had never unpacked them, for he had had nowhere to put his things. He wasn't interested, it caused him no pang that he must now abandon them.

It was too late to do anything tonight. He sat hunched on the edge of his bed, his clasped hands hanging between his knees.

To hell, he thought. To hell with love and loyalty. They mean nothing.

He left Gimmell House at six o'clock in the morning. The house was silent, there was no sound. As he went through the gates the sun was climbing out of a haze and the countryside lay windless and still, with dew shining on the grass verges. There was promise of a glorious day.

He had not the vaguest idea of where he was going. He felt quite empty of purpose.

A few labourers were going to their work in the fields as he walked towards Middleham.

At this early hour he was surprised to find the station quite busy. There was excitement in the air; a kind of bewilderment. People gathered in groups to talk and stare at one another. The three

porters made a chattering knot along with five young soldiers, each struggling with his unaccustomed kit. The train came in, and khaki-clad men hung out of the windows, calling and pointing.

He looked at them without understanding.

It was the fourth of August, 1914.

Chapter 7

I

THE sun came up early these April mornings. It struck through the gap between the curtains right into his eyes. It robbed him of the dark security of sleep.

The sun couldn't be shut out because the curtains were too narrow to meet across the gap, the bed could not be moved, there was nowhere else in the room it would fit.

He had to wake to another day, to become conscious of daylight and the four walls round him, the shabby chest of drawers opposite the bed with the mirror above it, the bare, scratched table and the lopsided basket chair.

Today, he thought, I'm going to make the effort.

It was eight o'clock. He lay, still grasping at the fringe of drowsiness, feeling it slip away from him.

I must get up. It's today that I'm going to make the effort.

He reached out to the upturned box beside the bed for the cup of water, the aspirin packet. He took three aspirins, washed them down.

He threw back the covers, and sat up on the edge of the bed, massaging his head; then got up in his pyjamas and lighted the gas ring, put on the kettle and made tea. He drank three cups. He never wanted anything to eat in the morning, which was a good thing, as there was no place to keep food fresh overnight. He even drank his tea without milk and sugar, and liked it better that way.

This is the beginning of the effort, he thought.

He pulled out a box from under the bed. It contained striped trousers, black coat, a clean shirt, a black tie.

He pulled on the trousers; rummaged in a drawer for vest and socks. His shoes, cleaned the night before, stood ready. He put them on, and a mackintosh over the outfit. Then he went next door to the barber for a wash and shave.

"Morning, Mr Shrewsbury. What can I do for you this morning? Shampoo and friction?"

"All the works."

"Going on the stage, or something?"

"Going after a job."

"That's the ticket "

"I don't know if it's the ticket or not."

Back in his room he put on the clean shirt, collar and tie; the black coat. He stood in front of the mirror, and saw the shaved, spruced figure of a man of forty-seven. The thick hair, sprinkled with grey, was sleeked back. The face, lined and set, was handsome and expressionless. Two deep furrows ran down from the corners of the defiant mouth, two vertical ones stood between the brows. The eyes brooded. He stared, and the eyes showed fear. He swung round, and caught up the mackintosh. He went out, locking the door.

The registry was in a street off Knightsbridge. Mrs Pewce, who ran it efficiently, had seen him before.

She said, "You again, Mr Shrewsbury?"

"Me again, Mrs Pewce."

"And what can I do for you this time?" Her tone was markedly sarcastic.

"The same again."

Her lips nipped in impatiently.

"I don't know that I've got anything at all that would suit you."

"Meaning——?"

"Well, really, Mr Shrewsbury! You must know by now that it doesn't do a man of your age and in your position any good to keep chopping and changing like this. Four posts in four years!"

"They didn't happen to suit me."

"I almost begin to wonder if anything suits you!"

He gave the ghost of a smile. "Try me, Mrs Pewce. Try me with something. I'm going to make an effort."

"Yes, but——"

"I've never been able to settle down since the war, and that's the truth."

She tapped the desk before her. "You know, that's really no excuse at all. I hear it so often. The war unsettled us all, but the war has been over nine years. Nine years! It's 1927."

He nodded; his expression was truculent.

"I know. What can we do about it?"

"When did you leave your last position? Let me see—you were with Mr Condomore, weren't you?"

"It was no good. A rotten place. I left there nine months ago."

"What have you been doing since?"

"Nothing."

"You mean—literally nothing?"

"Just that."

"Well, Mr Shrewsbury—I—by the way, what about references?"

"I used the last four to light the fire. I've got one good one—you've seen that already."

"You mean the one from Lord Cedely? But I don't know whether that would cut any ice today, really I don't. 1914!—It's thirteen years old. And Lord Cedely is dead now."

"I'm aware of that."

"Well—you've got the makings of a good butler, I've always said that—if you'd only make up your mind to stop in a place——"

"Thank you!" he interrupted with a grim smile.

"I'll have to see what I can do. But don't expect too much."

"I told you I was making an effort. Give me a bit of credit for that."

She reached for her book, and turned the pages reverently.

"Here's something that should suit you. Major-General Fairfield. It's Cricklewood way. Three in family. Rather old-fashioned people. Staff of four. The salary——"

"That'll do. Write it down."

She raised her eyebrows at him, gave a sharp sigh, and wrote on a card. His eyes wandered round the room, noticing the six frail daffodils in a cheap vase on the window-sill, noticing that the window-sill was dusty. Outside, the day, too brightly begun, had turned to a sad grey. A sudden shower stung the panes.

"There . . ." She handed him the card. "And I hope that's the last I shall see of you for a long time, Mr Shrewsbury." She made a coy attempt at joviality. "You really must try to settle down. For your own good. I'm only speaking for your own good, you know."

"I'm sure you are."

"Do you know how to get there? I expect you'll go straight there now. Take a 73 to Hyde Park Corner and change on to a 16."

"I know, thank you."

She awarded him a smile, primly indulgent.

"You had a good war record, you know. They must have taught you discipline in the Army; but the trouble I have with some of you ex-servicemen you wouldn't believe! Living in the past; that's what's wrong with some of you."

His eyes, staring at her, looked almost black and had hard glints of light in them.

"If that was all, Mrs Pewce. If that was all!"

"Well, good-bye," she said. "And good luck."

"Thanks. Good-bye."

Outside, the icy rain hit his face like a wet rag. He turned up the collar of his mack as he waited for the bus. A twinge of neuralgia shot through his head; he felt empty and cold.

But at least he had achieved something this morning: he had made The Effort. He had done what he set out to do.

But this thought only served to bring to his mind the memory of other efforts, and their consequences. The shadows reached out and enveloped him; his heart-beat slowed and a constricted feeling came into his chest.

He stood in the crowded bus, and at Hyde Park Corner left its shelter almost reluctantly for the cheerless street. Now there was another wait.

He took out the card Mrs Pewce had given him and read it over slowly. "Major-General Fairfield, 18 Shere Terrace, Cricklewood. To introduce Edward Shrewsbury, butler, aged 47."

He held it in his hand.

The crowds went milling by and the bus was a long time coming. The rain turned to driving sleet. A number 16 went past, packed.

Umbrellas like the spread wings of big black birds darted in packs, in flocks.

Suddenly he felt fear invading one corner of his mind, settling there, darting its shafts into his brain. He was afraid of the fear, ashamed of it, but it persisted. Fear of the unknown; fear of what effort led to.

Another 16 bus went by, quite full.

He knew what was coming of this fear; a battle he dreaded, a battle of the will. He wasn't strong enough; he couldn't take the battering. Courage died, and the fear came sick into his throat.

The struggle was hopeless from the start, he hadn't even the heart to fight.

He tore the card into a dozen pieces and dropped them in the gutter.

There! That was that. Torment me, would you? Not likely! To hell with it, he thought, for he still had something that he called his pride, though it amounted to little and mainly showed itself in occasional bitterness against his own inertia.

A bus drew up at the stop. He didn't look at the direction board, but swung himself on and rushed up the stairs to the top deck.

He found a seat, and his fingers searched frantically for pipe and matches. He drew deep; the smoke went down into his lungs.

That was better. He had no regret at all for what he had just done, only a tremendous relief at having once more escaped from one of life's traps.

Escape! And this time it was for good.

When he looked out of the window the bus was at Oxford Circus. He descended, and began to walk along New Oxford Street—without any particular purpose—till he came to Charing Cross Road, where he turned down.

To escape the rain he went into a little café in Stacey Street, Soho; the Dragon. He hadn't been in there before. The coffee was good, and hot; he ordered brioches and cheese.

Now the short, hard breaths were relaxing and coming more easily.

The effort was over and done with; it had been short-lived. Everything of that kind was over. He had finished with Mrs Pewce and her cards and her good positions; she would never admit him again.

He sat for an hour in the warm, steamy café, soothed as though he had taken a narcotic. No strain now; everything had resolved itself.

He had nothing left to do but drift. He had nowhere to go. He had all the time in the world.

When he felt the urge to move, he wandered into the street and back to his own room. He went up the stairs, past the closed doors of the first and second floors—for it was a tall house—and put his key into his own lock.

The room struck cold, but he soon had the gas-fire lit and a certain cosiness was apparent.

He got out of his good clothes, thinking that it was probably the last time he would ever wear them, and put on his old ones. Then, his neat habits asserting themselves, he folded the ones he had just taken off and replaced them in the box under the bed. When he had left the room three hours ago he hadn't thought of returning quite like this. There came a crisis in life beyond which the will and the heart would not go.

Words and phrases kept saying themselves over in his mind. . . . "It doesn't do a man of your age any good to keep chopping and changing. . . . You've got the makings of a good butler if you'd only make up your mind. . . . Do try and settle down, for your own good. . . ."

No, no, no! he said aloud. At least, nobody will ever be able to say those things to me again.

He lay down on the bed in his clothes and pulled the quilt over him. Nothing to do. Nowhere to go. All the time in the world. When one is quite alone, sleep is the only friend.

Half asleep, under his eyelids he saw the comforting orange glow of the gas fire. He was warm at last. And there was nothing he need do, nothing—but lie here as long as he liked. Nobody would interfere; nobody would call.

Here in his little cell he, Eddie Boan, was quite isolated from life.

What had he called himself in his mind? It was a long, long time since he had thought of himself as Eddie Boan. Even in the Army he had been Edward Shrewsbury.

Eddie Boan. Who was there left on earth to know him by that name? Of his own family, how few! Ten years ago he had been given compassionate leave to go and attend his father's funeral. His eldest sister Nellie—then a woman in her fifties—had come down from Manchester where she was housekeeper to a doctor. He and she had stared at each other. . . . "Only we two—out of ten?"

Years before, Alfie and his family had moved into Wales; they had left no address. Bertie was dead. Florrie was dead. Minnie had never been heard of for nearly twenty years. Dolly was unable to leave her children and come down from Glasgow. Willie and Charlie had both been killed in the war. The two of them, Nellie and Eddie, followed their father's coffin to the village churchyard; made arrangements for a homely woman to go and live with their mother.

Eddie Boan went back to France, and a fortnight later had news of his mother's death. He could not get leave for that. Nellie alone attended that funeral. He had not seen Nellie since; they had quite lost touch. She would be getting an old woman now.

Eddie Boan! Exhausted, he slept, and when he woke it was dark. He had been sleeping for several hours. It was nearly eight o'clock in the evening.

He got up, and prepared to go out. Not much attraction, to sit alone between those four walls for hours, waiting for the night to pass, for he knew he wouldn't sleep again.

He locked his door and went into the street, turning east. He went up an alleyway, up a flight of stairs, pushed open a door and entered a crowded room. It was hot in there, and the tobacco smoke was so thick it was swirling. They were all sitting round the table, and when they heard the door open they glanced up to see who it was, and made room for him.

He took his mack and jacket off, and slid on to a chair, shirt-sleeved like the others.

"'Lo, Eddie," said Sooty, the fat, bald fellow who ran this joint.

"Hullo."

Someone dealt him the cards.

"What's biting you?"

"Nothing."

"You look all in. What you want's a drink—wait! The usual?"

"All right."

He took the drink and put it on the table in front of him.

"Drink it, Ed," said his next-door neighbour, "or it'll do you no good. You being hung tomorrow?"

"I've been after a job."

"Get it?"

"No."

"Can you beat that?" said Sooty. "What does a guy like you want, looking for a job? A guy that's a natural with the cards, enough to make all the money he wants? Garn!"

"Thought it might be a change."

"Look, I tell you boys something. I know this guy Eddie. I first come across this guy in the Eepers Salient. Playing poker! He'd take all their money off them, and the next night they was dead. Every time it come out like that. They'd be saying, tomorrow night we'll have our revenge; and there never was no tomorrow night. Tomorrow night they was gone west, and Eddie sitting there in a foot of mud playing cards with the next lot, and taking all their money."

"Shut up about the Eepers Salient," said Edward.

"I was only kidding . . ."

The game went on. Newcomers drifting in said, "'Lo, Eddie? Making money?"

"Who's making any money?"

He lost heavily. The cards looked blurred; he even confused the suits. The neuralgia pains began again in his head. He sat on, not wishing to give the impression that he was leaving because he was losing. He sat until the game broke up. It was past midnight.

The cold of the streets hit him again as he walked back to his room. He had forgotten to turn out the gas fire and the place was as hot as a furnace, but he welcomed it. It was better to see that fiery orange glow than unfriendly darkness.

He lit the gas ring and made some tea, remembering as he sipped it that he had forgotten to eat since the coffee and brioches this morning. Perhaps that accounted for some of his depression. He was reluctant to go to bed, for a fierce migraine headache was developing, and he knew that not only would he lie awake, but the pain always seemed worse when lying down.

He paced up and down the small room, and suddenly came face to face with himself in the mirror. Gone was the spruce reflection of this morning, the face which though severe was at least groomed and human. He saw haggard, grimed features, roughened hair; and worst of all, defeated eyes. Hungry, lonely eyes.

He went crazy with rage. He picked up the nearest thing, the wooden chair, and flung it furiously at the glass, which crashed in a tinkling shower on the hearth. The chair split, and he hurled the pieces into a corner.

All this had made considerable noise, and now in the sudden silence that fell he waited. Nothing happened. Nothing would happen. That was the hell of it. To live in a house full of people who cared so little that they would not even bother to investigate a crash in the night. That was loneliness with a vengeance. You could die alone in this place, and no one would ever miss you or tap at your door.

He took half a dozen aspirins, put out the light and the fire, and lay down on the bed. The aspirins had no effect upon his raging headache, they only made him feel sick.

It was beginning to come light before he fell asleep. He slept till the middle of the morning, and woke exhausted and listless.

What did I do this to myself for? he thought. Why didn't I go for that job? Well, it's too late now. There'll never be another chance. I've well and truly dished myself for ever.

He got up and made tea, drinking several cups. The agony had gone from his head, leaving a dull ache and tenderness.

The day was bright, and he went out and wandered about the streets. The sight of lunch-hour crowds packing into the restaurants reminded him that he might eat, but now he had no desire to. The thought of food sickened him. He had looked at his watch four times in an hour. Time crawled. He had all the time in the world.

He found himself near the British Museum, and as though looking back into another life, he saw two young men—himself and Rollin Burkley—hurrying up those steps on a wet winter afternoon to spend an hour in their favourite spot, the Historical Documents Room.

He wished he had not come here, had not been reminded of this. It only brought the shadow nearer and caused him to suffer the blows again.

When he came to London after the war he had gone to look up Rollin at the law firm where he had last been heard of.

He had said to the girl at the desk, "You used to have a Mr Rollin Burkley here."

"If you'll wait a minute I'll enquire."

"Do you mean he's here now?"

"No, I never heard the name."

An elderly man had come from the inner office. "You were asking for Rollin Burkley? Didn't you know? He was killed in the last September of the war. If you'd care to wait I could get you some details——"

"No. No, it's all right, thank you. I'm sorry to have troubled you."

He had already learned to take such stabs with dull acceptance. In 1915 he had picked up an evening paper while on leave and seen a blurred portrait which was nevertheless unmistakably Guy.

"Killed in action. The Hon Guy Lintern, eldest son and heir of Lord Cedely. Captain, third battalion Shropshire Yeomanry."

And less than a year later, Bartholomew.

Barty's face—too young, for the snap had been taken at Eton—and underneath: "2nd Lieut. the Hon. Bartholomew Lintern. Died of wounds, March 18, 1916." Last time he had seen Barty they had walked in the lanes near Gimmell House on a summer evening, and talked about a holiday in London.

Now, after so many years, he found himself hurrying away from the British Museum and such memories. But once started, they would not let him go. He walked like a hunted man until he regained the casual impersonality of Charing Cross Road.

Automatically he stopped to look over the books outside Foyles, but for the first time their magic lure failed to work. He had always been able to lose himself here for an hour, and had never left without a volume or two tucked under his arm, eager to get home and start reading.

Now he found himself turning over a page or two but making no sense of what he read. No attraction. No eagerness. It was a pity, when he had all the time in the world to read, and then he realised with a chill that struck at his heart that for some time he had been unable to read a book through. Nothing gripped him, and after a few chapters he would put the volume aside, never to pick it up again.

Reading! If he should lose that, what was left?

All the time in the world! It was a mockery.

He dropped the book he was holding and walked away blindly. A kind of desperation seized him as he realised his own isolation. This was the agony of loneliness, and it had never come to him with full force before. If there was only one person he could talk to! Not the chaps at Sooty's. Not the chaps at the pool-room. Some real person. Someone from the old life.

Fool! he thought. Hopeless fool. Homeless fool.

Since he broke the mirror last night he had felt himself slipping. Yesterday had been a day of crisis, following nine months of haphazard living. Now he had reached the stage when a man begins to let go of life itself. He had suffered all there was to suffer; now he saw the inevitable end, but he was past resisting. Frightened of what he saw before him, of this void into which he had come, he could do no more for himself.

He walked on towards Cambridge Circus.

There comes a moment when the mute cry of the human spirit in extremity is answered by some power which cannot be dismissed as coincidence. The desperation of the cry itself releases the force that comes to its aid.

A bus came from the Circus towards him; stopped alongside him. A woman stood clutching the rail, preparing to descend. She was also trying to manipulate an umbrella and hold on to two bulky bags. Something had to go. One of the bags fell on the pavement; the bus lurched and she cried, "Oh!"

Edward picked up the bag and held it out to her.

"Thank you. Thank you very much. I was always one for giving myself too much to carry."

He was looking at her face. He knew that somewhere he had seen her before and it was a long, long time ago. The brown eyes; the way she smiled.

"I know," she said quietly. "It's you. You don't remember me, but I'd have known you anywhere. Your height and the shape of your face, and your eyes. Eddie, isn't it?"

For one mad moment he even wondered if she was one of his own sisters.

"Yes, but I——"

"It's twenty-five years ago if it's a day," she said. "You came to my uncle's cottage near Epsom. You dug the garden and I gave you some of my birthday cake. Now do you remember? I'm Mary Vincent."

"Of course! Now I remember."

Her face was comely, unlined, happy. Her brown eyes, wide apart, were warm, with laughter lines at the corners. She was plump, well-dressed, with some chic in the fit of her coat, the small winged hat; she looked like a person whom life has used kindly.

She was giving him the shrewd look of a perceptive woman.

"You don't look so good. Come round to my place and have a drink. I've got a nice place, only a step from here."

The almost frantic relief that flashed into his face surprised and puzzled her, for she was prepared for him to decline and pass on after a few casual words.

"Thank you. Thank you very much."

"Come on, then."

He took the two bags from her, one in either hand.

"That's nice—to get something carried for me." She had a comfortable smile, wide and dimpling at the corners, showing well-kept, even dentures.

She led the way down a side-street, stopping at a block of flats. They went upstairs to the first floor; she found a Yale key and unlocked her door, ushering him into the small vestibule.

"There! Home again."

The sitting-room was neat, colourful, and rather fussy, with cushions, embroidered chair-backs, and china figures of dogs and wide-skirted girls on window-ledges and mantelpiece. There was a low tea-table piled with magazines, and photographs everywhere. Edward recognised stage stars, and the photographs were signed in dashing scripts.

"Don't you like my flat? There's kitchen, bath, and bedroom as well. Cosy! Sit down, and I'll get the drinks." She opened the sideboard and took out bottles and glasses. "I'm mixing you my special, a real pick-up and guaranteed not to go to the weakest head."

She held out the glass to him. "Here's wishing!"

"No, thanks," he said awkwardly.

"No? What's wrong?"

"Nothing—but no, thanks, really."

"Oh, come on! There's something up. What's the matter with my drink?"

"It's only that I haven't eaten for about twenty-four hours. I'd better not risk it."

She looked thoughtful.

"Well, you know best." She put her own drink down untouched. "Haven't you been so well, Eddie? . . . I say, you'll have to excuse me calling you Eddie like this. Cheek of me. It just popped out; I'm like that."

"It's nothing," he said. "Things haven't been so good with me. I've got a bit careless about eating."

She nodded. "I'm sorry. I've never been hard up myself, but lots of my friends have."

"It isn't that. I'm all right for money."

Her smile flashed out. "Well, if you're only hungry, what's to stop us eating?"

"That's what I was thinking. Will you let me take you out for a meal?"

She considered. The offer was tempting, for she was tired and enjoyed a meal out. But something in his face made her stop and think. She was by nature an understanding woman.

"Nothing doing," she said. "We're in, we'll stop in. I always have my supper early, because I go on duty at seven. One thing I can do is cook; it's my hobby. You sit here and have a rest, and I'll knock us something up."

"That's putting you to a lot of trouble."

"Don't be silly; it's not a bit of trouble. And I'll give you a better meal than any you'll get outside. Let me get my things off."

She dashed into the kitchen, and took out of her little larder the chicken she was keeping for her day off, Sunday. She switched on the cooker, popped the chicken into a pan, well-basted, and set it to roast for a while before she dismembered it.

Meanwhile she scraped a few potatoes, and shelled a handful of peas. Before she had finished this he was in the kitchen.

"Can't I help?"

"You bet you can. Lay the table in there; you'll find all the things in the cupboard. And could you put me some plates to heat? There's half an apple pie in the larder; I'll pep that up in the oven when the chicken comes out, and it won't take me a minute to mix a custard."

He became busy, and she noticed with interest that at once he was a different man, much of the droop gone from his shoulders and a little life glinting in his baffled eyes.

"That's better," she said.

"What is?"

"Nothing. I didn't know I was talking aloud. It's a bad habit when you live alone."

"You're telling me!"

"Do you live alone?"

"Yes."

"Not in a valet's job, then?"

"Not in any job."

She took out the chicken and dismembered it; put butter into the frying-pan and waited for it to sizzle. Then she laid the chicken-joints in. While they were frying she found time to make a custard, prepare the coffee, and rustle up a little tomato soup from among the left-overs in the larder. To this she added the cream from the top of the milk.

He was back in the kitchen by now, watching her in amazement.

"What a wonderful meal! You're very quick."

"Quick! I've never in my life had time to let any moss grow on my insteps, and this is fun to me."

At last she handed him the vegetables.

"Dish those up, can you? I'll make the gravy. The colander's under the sink."

The chicken looked a dream. He helped her to carry everything into the sitting-room. Her eyes noted that he had laid the table beautifully and made water-lilies of the table napkins.

"Those are pretty. Where did you learn that trick?"

"I've been a butler for a good many years."

"Jolly good butler, I'd say. Well, come on; let's get down to this feast. I'm starving myself."

The meal was even more of a success than she had bargained for. When it was over he said, "I'm going to clear everything away and wash up. It's only fair."

"You're going to do nothing of the kind. I bundle everything into the sink and leave it till morning. There's an old woman, Mrs Petty, who comes in to do my washing up; it's a bit extra to supplement her pension. Don't take the bread out of the poor old devil's mouth! Fit yourself into that chair, and laze over your coffee. I'm going to do the same."

She was dying to ask him questions, but knew that would be just the way to frighten him off. It was too soon. The easy thing was to babble about herself, and so encourage him to babble too.

"Still an hour before I need move," she said.

"Did you say you have to go to work?"

"For my sins."

He looked at the photographs round the room.

"Are you on the stage, by any chance?"

"Bless you, no. Only in the theatre. I've been a dresser for twenty years. I'm dresser to Mercia Litton now; we've been at His Majesty's for nearly two years, and it looks as if the play'll run for ever."

"Do you like your job?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Now you're asking me. Tell you the truth, I'm getting a bit sick of it. It palls. When I first went into it I was crazy about it. The excitement. Handling lovely costumes. Flowers coming in. Seeing famous stars. But you get too much of it. Late hours; never done. I've been down there half the day already pressing clothes. And Mercia flinging herself about the place like a windmill. You can get too much of other people's temperaments, especially when you're not so young as you used to be."

"You only look about thirty-five."

Her brown eyes widened and twinkled.

"Thanks for the lovely compliment. If it was from anybody but you I'd think it was soft soap. I was forty-five last December; think back, and you'll know I'm speaking the truth. You must be about the same age."

"Forty-seven."

He was evidently not going to be forthcoming with much information about himself. The hands of the clock were going round. She was afraid she was going to lose him again, after all. It was a pity, for he had fairly blossomed in her company. He looked a different man already from the lost creature with the miserable eyes she had recognised in Charing Cross Road.

Seven o'clock. She got up reluctantly.

"I'm sorry, but I've got to push off. The curse of the wage-slave is upon me. What are you going to do now?"

"Go home, I suppose. I can't thank you enough for the dinner—and everything."

"Where's home?"

"I've got a room," he said abruptly.

He thought for a moment; she could see the struggle going on behind his face.

"Would you—let me take you out for a meal tomorrow? Any time that suits you. And I'm not fishing for another invitation here; I wouldn't accept it. I want to treat you."

She beamed. "There's nothing I'd like better. I could make it one o'clock. Suit you?"

"Any time suits me. I've got nothing to do."

"Pity," she said, and he noticed the sympathy behind the obvious curiosity. "Would you like to pick me up outside the theatre?"

"Yes, I'll do that"

"You know where it is?"

"I'll soon find out."

"If there's one thing I like," she said, "it's having something to look forward to."

"I won't let you down," he said.

She thought it a strange thing to say. Why on earth should he even have thought of letting her down? Or of her letting him down? How did the idea of letting-down come into it?

She began to put her things on.

"We can walk together to the end of the street, then I'll have to fly."

2

He took his good clothes out from the box under the bed, but instead of the black bow tie he put on a grey silk spotted one with full ends. He polished his shoes. He went next door for a shave.

"I see you've got the job," said the barber.

"You see wrong."

"Well, there's nothing like trying again."

He went back to his room to wait until it was time to start. He couldn't really believe it. He couldn't believe that he had someone to take out to lunch, somebody from the old days. A brown-eyed, comely woman with a smile as warm as a blessing. Somebody to talk to, and somebody, too, who had known him when he was

young and confident. Perhaps that made it easier, perhaps she would still think of him as confident.

His eye fell on the broken mirror, the smashed chair in the corner, and his brows drew down. It looked like the room of a madman or a drunk, no sort of a place for a man who was going out to lunch with a woman.

He bundled up all the broken rubbish and carried it downstairs to the junk-heap in the yard.

Now, fool, without a glass you can't even look at yourself to see if you're fit to meet anybody! Somewhere he had a folding mirror; he rummaged through drawers, was relieved when he found it. He set it up on the chest and faintly approved of his own appearance. Above all, for her benefit he mustn't look hang-dog.

He was outside the theatre ten minutes too soon, and at one precisely she came out of a side door and down the alleyway. Her smile was full of bright anticipation. She was dressed for spring, in a well-fitting dark blue coat and a white hat with a glittering buckle and small veil.

"Where are we going?" she asked when she had greeted him.

"Anywhere you like. Do you want to be near the theatre?"

"Heavens, no! There's no *matinée* today, thank goodness. If you like good food without frills I can recommend a little place called the Dragon, not too far away. You've probably never heard of it."

"Let's go."

When they got there he recognised the café where he had had coffee two days ago; on the day that was best forgotten.

She went in, and the proprietor, who evidently knew her, came forward beaming.

"Well, Miss Vincent! Good morning!"

"Good morning, Alphonse. I've brought along a friend to introduce to you—Mr Boan."

"But Monsieur is not a stranger. He came here for coffee two mornings ago."

"What astounding observation!" Edward said.

"I never forget a client, monsieur, even if he only comes once. A nice table for two?"

"Yes, Alphonse," said Mary. "Give us one of the comfortable ones along the wall. We want to linger over our meal."

Edward followed her. She had called him Eddie—and Boan. It gave him quite a shock to realise that she belonged to the days before Edward Shrewsbury.

Over the soup she talked gaily, telling little incidents of the theatre. The *plat du jour* was eaten, and then over the cheese and coffee she looked at him squarely and said with deliberation, "Do you mind if I ask you something?"

"I don't mind what you ask me—but *you* may mind if I don't answer."

"I'll risk that. You said a funny thing yesterday when we were planning this meeting. You said you wouldn't let me down. Why should you think of letting me down? Do you usually let people down?"

"I haven't let anybody down yet—except myself."

"I see. You've got this letting-down business in your hair. I'm sorry about that. You've had a rough time, haven't you, Eddie?"

"Does it show?"

"It certainly does. Care to tell me?"

A muscle in his cheek twitched, and his fingers fiddled with the coffee spoon.

"I don't mind telling you, but it sounds like a lot of self-pity, and that I've no use for."

"I shan't take it as self-pity. Pour it out, Eddie. I'm in a receptive mood."

"I think you're a fine person."

Her eyes danced. "There you go, flattery again! But I feel we're old friends. We've known each other twenty-five years, anyway. That ought to be enough to make a confession box of me."

"Confession?" He gave a twisted smile. "Don't expect anything lurid. The only thing I have to confess is that for the first thirty-five years of my life—all the best part—I let other people use me for their own ends. I had too much faith in mankind. I finished on the scrap-heap, when everyone had done with me, and the war happened along at that moment, and I found myself a full private in the P.B.I. Four and a half years of that, and I hadn't any faith in anything, not even in myself."

"But the war has been over eight—no, nine years. Didn't the luck change?"

"It was a bit too late to start life with boyish enthusiasm at thirty-nine. The spirit was gone. It was too damned hard."

"What did you do when you came out of the Army? Had you got a home to go to?"

"My parents were dead by then. There was nowhere I could settle down. I had to work. I went as valet-companion to my old company commander. He had one leg and one arm, and a riddled chest. I stopped with him till he died, in 1922. His death didn't make me feel any brighter. He wasn't a patient sufferer, by any means, and he had the devil of a tongue, but we understood one another. After he passed out I felt very much on my own."

"Where were you then?"

"Here in London. I thought I'd better go back to my old job as butler, so I signed on at a registry. The next four years I had exactly four jobs—and that brings me up to present date."

"What was wrong—you, or the jobs?"

"A bit of both. They weren't very good jobs—the sort of people I liked to work for went out with hansom cabs and Edward the Seventh—and I was pretty intolerant myself by then."

"And now I think you said you were out of a job?"

"That may have given you a wrong impression. Out of a job suggests the future possibility of being *in* a job, and that possibility doesn't exist for me. I chucked it all to the winds two days ago, and tore up my registry card."

"Whew!" She gave a low whistle. "So you said good-bye to life two days ago at the age of forty-seven."

"I said, to hell with any sort of effort. I said I was through."

Her eyes went deep and thoughtful. It seemed to him that they were too shrewd, too penetrating, tearing away veil after veil of his private motives.

"Have you got any friends, Eddie?"

"Friends?"

"Real friends. Good chaps—and girls."

"Chaps I play cards and billiards with. Not chaps you can talk to. No girls."

She drew in her breath.

"I'm beginning to wonder what you would have done if I hadn't happened to step off that bus?"

"That's what I've been wondering ever since you stepped off it."

She said quickly, with real concern, "Was it as bad as that? Was it really? Do you mean to tell me that I came across you when you were pretty well all in?"

"If I was, it was my own fault. But you get to the stage when you can't fight on any more, then you let yourself sag, and what comes after, God knows! I didn't get as far as that, thanks to you. You wouldn't know what I mean."

"Wouldn't I? I can guess. Oh, Eddie, I could weep for you. I always pictured you having a fine life."

"Pictured me? You mean, you thought of me after that day we met?"

The colour rushed to her cheeks, making her look young and pretty.

"I didn't forget you. Wasn't I silly? I even thought that one day you might look me up. But I suppose you had a lot of interests in those days. What's happened to all your old friends, Eddie? You must have had some. You were such an attractive person."

"My best friends were killed in the war. It's too long a story to tell."

She realised then that the greater part of his story had not been told, might never be told. She was silent for a few minutes, finishing her coffee. Then she said briskly, "And what happens now? I've fed you, you've fed me. Do you walk out of my life again, like you did once before?"

The tang of her words pricked him, as she had intended they should.

"If there's any walking out done," he said, "it won't be by me. But what do you want with me? I'm not much good to you."

"If I'm any good to *you*, that suits me."

He considered this gravely, with unmoving face. Then he called the waiter and asked for the bill. She found herself trying to catch a glimpse of the total, for she was afraid of what she had let him in for, and he saw her looking. He deliberately put a half-crown down for the waiter.

"If I'd been as broke as you seem to think me," he said, "I *would* have walked out on you."

She looked away quickly.

"Mary," he said, "that was a rotten thing to say, wasn't it? Do forgive me."

"Of course. It served me right."

"When do you have to be back at the theatre?"

"Not till seven."

"Are you sick of me? Do you want to get rid of me?"

"I'm past the age for being coy," she said. "If I want a man's company I say so straight out. I want yours. What shall we do—ride on a bus? Or would you care to come back to my place? Or shall we go to your place?"

"Your place—if you don't mind."

"Come along, then."

On the way back she stopped at a shop

"Let's have a Sally Lunn. I always say tea's nothing without a Sally Lunn. We'll have it about half-past five, and that'll give me plenty of time to get to the theatre."

"Are you going to let me stay till half-past five?" he asked, and, taken off his guard, realised at once that he had spoken too eagerly.

She gave him a shrewd look, and her eyes sparkled with fun.

"Stay as long as you blooming well like."

They went into the flat and she put a match to the sitting-room fire.

"Might as well be cosy."

"It is cosy." He hesitated "You know I haven't got a place I could ask you to."

She shrugged her shoulders and laughed. "Men never have. You should see the kennels some of our successful actors make for themselves! I know! It takes a woman to make a home"

"It's kind of you to put it like that. I've got one room, and it's a bit of a mess."

"You make me sound pushful," she said, "but you're welcome to come round here whenever you feel like it. I'm worried about you, Eddie, and that's the truth. I feel like your big sister." She picked up a cushion and tossed it lightly to him. "Stick that behind your back. Feel like a snooze? Or would you rather talk?"

"You talk. I like to hear you."

"What about?"

"Some more of those stories you were telling me, about the theatre."

"Oh, those. I could write a book!"

Her rich, comfortable voice meandered on, punctuated with laughter, for she was determined to cultivate a casual atmosphere and put him at his ease. When he began to fidget she read the signs aright and said, "Don't you want to smoke, or something?"

"Oh, could I?"

"For pity's sake!" She jumped up. "Let me find you an ash-tray—I've got plenty. I'm not used to people who stand on ceremony about that."

"Do you smoke yourself?"

"Hardly ever." She laughed. "I've got a yen for expensive chocolates, and can't afford smoking too. My friends make up for me. Sometimes when the boys and girls are in here the air is so thick you could carve it."

He pictured her in the midst of a scene of jolly company and was at once depressed.

"Perhaps you have scores of friends," he said. "A woman like you would be popular. Perhaps you haven't really time for me. Don't let me intrude on you."

There was a bite of bitterness in his voice that hurt her. She thought, What he must have been through to talk like that! He's quite lost faith in himself.

Her matter-of-factness came to the rescue.

"Look," she said. "If I didn't want you here, if I preferred your room to your company I'd tell you so. That's me. I never wrapped anything up in my life, or wreathed my face in social smiles while I was really thinking 'I wish this gloomy old So-and-so would go.' I want you here, Eddie. I'm glad I've met you again; it's the nicest thing that's happened to me in years. Do you believe me?"

He was so touched that for a minute he could hardly speak.

"I do believe you. You must think me a touchy horror."

Her eyes became soft and dreamy.

"I'll give myself away to you, Eddie. That time we met. I was only a young girl and romantic, and I fell a little bit in love with you. Yes, at first sight, like girls do. I thought about you for ages. I thought you might look me up in London, but I never blamed you for not doing so. You were so awfully good-looking, like a fairy prince coming up the garden with the old man and eating my birthday cake. Ah well, we all have our little lunacies when we're young. We're old enough to talk sense now. I think it's lovely to be middle-aged and to say what you like without caring about being misunderstood."

At half-past five she made tea, buttered the Sally Lunn, and added home-made jam and cake.

He had already perceived that she had great personal charm, which to him was a superficial thing; now he realised that she possessed an extra gift, only to be compared with the glaze on fine porcelain, the hall-mark of quality.

"I'm afraid I'll have to push off," she said, looking at the clock. "What about you? Have you anywhere to go? Will you be all right?"

"Will I be——" For a moment the absurdity of her concern staggered him; then for the first time a ghost of his old smile touched his mouth.

"Why are you smiling?" she asked.

"It was you, asking me if I'd be all right. I've managed on my own for quite a long time, you know! And it means a lot that anyone should bother about me. I'll be all right. Only, Mary, am I going to see you again?"

She gave the brim of her hat a twist and settled her veil.

"Well, I should hope so! Only tomorrow's no good, there's a *matinée* every Saturday, and I'm down at the theatre all the blessed day. Then comes Sunday "

"What do you do on Sunday?"

"What do I do? Well, in the mornings I usually nip down to St Martin's and sit in a back pew. It's quiet there, and nobody to criticise you or gape. In the afternoon I sometimes go over to Chiswick to see a girl friend of mine, a retired actress. But it's nice spring weather. How about a ride on the bus?"

"With me?"

"That's what I meant."

"And you'll let me take you to lunch first?"

"What about you coming here? No point in spending money in *cafés* "

"You come out to lunch with me, or the whole thing's off!"

She was delighted with his flash of spirit. She told herself that he was waking up; that at least he was no longer apathetic.

"All right, then. Call for me here, at one."

As she made her way to the theatre she went over in her mind all that he had told her about himself. Her feminine instinct went straight to the point. A woman! she told herself. A woman, and it was pretty bad, and he's never got over it. Oh well——!

3

When they met for lunch next day she was surprised at the change in him, but was careful not to let him see that she noticed the more confident set of head and shoulders, the readier smile, the livelier eyes.

He offered her the menu, and she took a long time to choose, for she was passing over the more expensive items.

But she did not deceive him.

"Don't look at all the cheap dishes!" he said with a frown. "I can see that's what you're doing, and it's not very complimentary to me."

"I'm sorry, Eddie—honestly I am. Please don't look so cross about it. I didn't mean——" Her brown eyes were friendly and yet perplexed.

"You left me on my own last night, and I improved the shining hour by winning four pounds at poker. That ought to take care of our afternoon out."

"Oh!" she flashed. "Is that how you make your money?"

At first he was shocked and a little displeased at her blunt outspokenness; but that was just Mary. He had already known her long enough to discover that she never minced matters but spoke her mind.

"That is not how I make my money," he said. "It's just a sideline. Any objection?"

"I've no objection," she said, with her rich smile. "I even like to hear you natter at me. That's better than your eve-of-execution attitude two days ago. I'm going to have scallops, veal-and-ham pie, and a glass of dry Graves. Any objection?"

"You win." He even grinned at her. "Where shall we go for our bus ride?"

"Kew Gardens is nice. We could find a sheltered spot and sit in the sun, and the glass-houses are lovely and warm. We could get tea there."

She saw a cloud come over his face, and wondered why. The thought had come into his head, was he giving himself away again? Was he sliding too easily into an intimate relationship with another person who might cast him aside? The result of these conjectures was a reserve that lasted until they got to Kew. Sensing this remoteness in him, she was both intrigued and troubled, and racked her brains for its reason.

Could he really have been offended by what she said about his money? She could not imagine he was so petty-minded.

She gave him a cautious glance, noticing the face that was bony now where in youth it had been gently planed, the greying hair, the pulled-down corners of the mouth, the secretive eyes, and hoped she was wrong.

"I'm sorry—truly I am," she said. "Can't you get over it? I'm a bit too forthright, I know, but I do mean well."

He started. "I don't know what you mean."

"That fool thing I said at lunch, about money. I guessed you were brooding over it."

The dismay in his face was succeeded by an apologetic smile.

"No such thing. Whatever made you think that? It's I who should say I'm sorry."

Her delighted laugh rang out; it was feminine, youthful, and yet sensuous.

"You went so quiet. I was afraid it was my fault."

"You'll have to forgive me," he said. "Let's get this subject straightened out. I haven't the least objection to telling you where my income comes from——"

"Oh, no, no, please. It's awful of me."

"Not a bit. The man I went to after I left the army—his name was

Woodman—left me a house and about a thousand pounds. I let the house, and it brings in enough for my humble needs.”

“Thank you for telling me,” she said; “but I do feel ashamed.”

“Let’s sit down,” he said, in a more friendly tone. “There’s a corner here, in the sun and out of the wind.”

She said, “I shan’t mind getting off my feet for a minute. That’s the first sign of middle-age.”

“You wear small, pretty shoes,” he said, looking down.

“That’s sheer vanity.”

“You mean, you won’t let Time hurt you.”

The rasp in his voice made her look at him sharply.

“I don’t think I can let that pass. Time hurts all right, but I’ve usually managed to deal it a sock in return.”

“You might tell me how.”

She considered. “How? I suppose by achieving a state which suggests to *you* that Time hasn’t hurt *me*. But we all have our memories, and the worst memories are of the good things that went bad. Let’s go and find some tea, shall we?”

She dimpled at the waitress, who at first refused hot buttered toast and then relented generously.

“I can see you know how to get what you want,” he said, admiring her poise and charming persistence. “That’s a valuable gift.”

“It doesn’t always work.” She looked round, at the budding green trees and the darting, chattering sparrows, the fresh spring grass and a nearby bed of pink tulips. “I don’t know whether I was wise to bring you here. This place reminds me of one of the good things that went bad. I used to come here with a man.”

The sudden gleam in his eyes spoke to her of more than sympathetic interest and encouraged her to go on.

She said, “I was engaged to him for six years—he was an actor. He wasn’t much when I first knew him, but he went up and up. He had great talent. Only a matter of a few years ago his name was in lights in the West End. Higher and higher he went—and I stayed where I was. We were always going to get married—you know how it is. Then when the time came for getting married he found he could do better, so he made a clean break with me. Nothing hysterical or cheap, you know, but a break. The girl he married was young and rich, her father was a Harley Street surgeon and her mother a titled woman. The connection did him good, but the marriage itself turned out as one would expect. She was spoiled and he was self-centred. He wasn’t happy in his private life, and that isn’t any good for an artist. But the worst thing to me was that he wasn’t taking care of himself. He never had done; he had left all that to me. I took care of him all right when I had the chance. He missed that. He got the silly idea that if you ignore physical disability and concentrate on the mind—in his case the mind meant his art—the body will fall into line and become your slave. Then he

found that he couldn't get away with it. It didn't work out; he was diabetic. He must have had a bad time. I looked on, it was all I could do, and it worried me like hell. Anyway, he must have thought about me sometimes, because about four years later I got a letter from him. He said that he'd bought the thirty years lease of a block of flats—the block I live in now—and he wanted to present me with mine. The one that had been ours. He was making a lot of money by then, and it touched me that in the end he'd thought about me. I wrote back and said thank you very much."

She glanced at Edward warily. "I suppose you think I should have chucked it back in his face like a wet fish? Got on my high horse, given a few ironic cheers? No pride, you see; that was the trouble with me."

He made no comment, but said, "What happened then?"

"I moved into the flat. It hurt at first, but later there was comfort in it. The memories chafed till I found out how to adapt myself to them and make them warm and familiar. What was hell to me was watching him go downhill and not being able to do a thing about it. I never saw him again after his marriage, you know; except on the stage. Then I heard he was very ill. I suffered all right! He'd been my lover, and now I felt as if he was my child. I was a fool, of course, but I kept my head up, and nobody guessed I cared a row of pins about him. His illness was in the papers; it made headlines. Then they took him to a nursing home. It said his young wife was constantly at his bedside. I didn't even send flowers! He got over that bad turn, and the damn fool went hell for leather into his work again and didn't even take reasonable precautions. Cocked a snook at the doctors, you know. That was him all over. A month later he went out like a light. I saw it on a placard when I was on my way to the theatre. God, how I cried that night. And I hadn't cried when he left me—not I. I cried because so long as he'd been on earth he'd been a bit mine, however much he thought he'd escaped me, but now he wasn't in the world any longer."

"What he did to you—did that turn you against men?"

She lifted her hands, and the slight shake she gave her head made her small earrings glitter.

"Not a bit. One swallow doesn't make a summer or one crow a winter. It didn't even turn me against *him*. He had to look after his career—artists always put their careers first; it's understood. But I hadn't cared about his art, I'd cared about his body that he'd despised and driven to death. That was what got me down."

He said with a display of feeling that surprised her, "He took your youth and the best of your life and left you alone."

"Alone? Oh, my stars, no. I've always had lots of friends, the theatre's full of them; and I'd my own place and my job and my health. I wasn't shot, not by a long chalk. But when I come to places like this, where we used to go, I can remember the way he

looked and the way my heart would turn over, and the way we'd go home to the flat and sit in the dusk, and he'd read highbrow plays to me in his lovely voice. It's damn silly. You probably think it's sordid."

"Nothing about you could be sordid," he said.

"That's nice of you, Eddie."

At that moment it occurred to him that she might have given these confidences in the hope of drawing reciprocal ones, and he closed up like a clam.

Mary looked uneasy. His conjecture was right; curious to know more of him, she had impulsively embarked upon her own intimate confession, and now could have bitten out her tongue for doing so, for after conventional expressions of sympathy he had withdrawn himself and seemed farther away than ever. There is no worse injury than to give one's self away and receive nothing in return.

"You must think me a Dreary Dinah to go into all this rigmarole," she said lightly. "But at least it explains why a theatrical dresser can afford to live in a three-pounds-a-week flat."

"I never even wondered," he said.

She said with nervous inconsequence, "Heaven save me from artists! Conspicuous, and distracting. Like zebras."

"I suppose you've had plenty to do with them."

"My dear! Altogether too much."

After this, intimate talk seemed impossible, and when the time came to part there was no arrangement made for a future meeting. Both were unhappily conscious of this, and as unhappily unable to do anything about it, and for the same reason. Each was reluctant to seem to impose on the other's time and privacy, their acquaintance having reached the stage when the footing becomes unsure; she because she felt that she had already gone too far, and he because he could not imagine that anybody really wanted him.

"Oh well——" she said.

He wanted to throw out a tentative, "I'll be seeing you?" but dare not.

So they each went their own way, feeling that the afternoon had been an anti-climax, if not a mistake.

He went back to his room, which now seemed quite unbearable, and then to the billiards hall, where he played badly and carelessly, and drank too much whisky, which as a rule he left alone.

The next two days were aimless, and he found himself again not wanting to eat at the proper times and waking at two in the morning too hungry for any more sleep.

On the third day he could stand it no longer, but went down to the theatre at about noon. He had no idea what time she would come out, but was prepared to wait for ever.

In about half an hour she appeared, hatless and with a coat slung round her shoulders.

"My goodness!" she said, and her smile was like the sun on his face. "I thought you'd gone out of my life."

"I wondered if you'd come out to lunch?"

"No good. It's Wednesday, matinée day. I'm just off to get some chips for Miss Litton. Fragile as she looks, she can't face a matinée without her chips. She's been rehearsing all morning, because the author, for some reason known to himself alone, has put new dialogue into the third act; so what with that, and two performances today, there's enough temperament going round to stop all the clocks in London."

She was steering him along as she spoke, and when they reached the chip shop and she was being served, she said, "You'd better come back to the theatre with me and share my sandwiches."

She took him back with her, to a gaslit room that seemed to be piled with exotic garments, and pushing aside a sewing-basket said, "Do sit down. I'll put the coffee on to boil."

"This is lovely," he said, looking round.

"I'm glad you think so. My needle is red hot. Just my luck to have a rowdy play where the costumes get ripped to pieces every performance. I always dream of one of those quiet drawing-room comedies where you wouldn't know the dresses had been worn. Excuse me, while I slip in with her chips."

When she came back she uncovered a pile of thinly cut ham sandwiches.

"I'm not going to take your lunch!" he exclaimed.

"Don't be silly. There's three times more than I'll eat. I always make too many, because somebody in the place always forgets to bring any and I like to be the fairy godmother. It gives me a phoney glow. Come on, have another!"

"They're marvellous."

She looked at him shrewdly. "You've not been eating again!"

"That's no crime, is it?"

"I think it is. My stars! I never seem to meet anybody but men who don't know how to take care of themselves, and women who stuff themselves with chips and then scream like pregnant tigresses because it goes to their waistline."

He put down his sandwich to laugh, and she rose and poured the boiling coffee.

"Mary," he said, "I can't go on like this."

"Like what?"

"Doing nothing. Drifting along Dying on my feet."

"You're dead right," she said. "You can't. But I can't for the life of me think what we're going to do about it—not just now. I will think; leave it to me."

The door opened and a man came sidling in. He was big and blond, about forty, with schoolboy good looks a little overblown.

"Mary——" He looked at Edward.

She waved her hand backwards. "This is Eddie Boan, a friend of mine. Eddie, this is our leading man——" She mentioned a famous name.

"Hullo, Eddie; glad to know you. Is he an actor, Mary?"

"No friend of mine is an actor, and no actor is a friend of mine. You ought to know that."

"Cruel! Look, darling, could you do a stitch for me?"

"Oh, la-la," she said. "Do I sew for the whole theatre?"

She examined his frayed buttonhole and threaded a needle.

"Your friend ought to be an actor, with his looks. Then perhaps he'd like to step into my shoes when I lay down my weary load. It won't be long, Mary. I feel like a very old, worn-out pack-mule with gallstones."

"You mean harness galls. And you know perfectly well you'll still be playing juvenile leads when you're ninety."

"Does he want a job?"

"Yes, but not in the theatre. And that's my final word. He used to be a butler—a very good butler." She bit off the thread expertly. "How's that, mule?"

He leant forward and planted a dramatic kiss between her brows.

"Sweet angel of the gaslight!" He looked at Edward. "Why doesn't he start a hotel? I thought all butlers finished up by starting hotels, and thus finally destroying their faith in human nature."

She threw a rather startled glance at Edward.

"Where's Mercia?" the actor asked. "She's not in her room."

"She's somewhere not far away—eating chips."

"Chips! Sweet death! And I've got to bend over and imbibe her greasy breath for a full three minutes in that romantic kissing duel. She'll stink like a hyena."

"Very zoo-ish today, aren't we?"

Mary pushed him out and shut the door. She stood with her back to it.

"Eddie?"

"Yes, Mary?"

"What's your house like—the one that was left to you?"

"Oh, a big old-fashioned sort of place. In Ryde Square, Chelsea. It was Woodman's family home, and he was the last. We lived there together, in three or four rooms of it."

"And it's yours? And it's furnished?"

"Oh yes. Adequately. It's let, you know."

"How long for?"

"The lease can terminate in a month's notice on either side."

She flopped down on a chair and stuck her needle through the tablecloth.

"Oh Eddie, you're lucky. For ten years it's been my pipe-dream to have such a house, to run it as a hotel. Why don't you? Why don't you!"

He sat thoughtfully.

"You heard what Rollo said? It's in your stars. Even to the bit about losing your faith in mankind. Why shouldn't that work the other way? Rollo's got an oracular gift; I've noticed it before. And between you and me, he's got a first-class brain too, he should have been an intellectual, not a comedy actor; that's his mental laziness."

"It's a big idea, Mary."

"Big ideas usually come out of the blue. And big ideas always arrive at the most inopportune moments! Look at that infernal clock—past one already, and at half-past I have to start dressing Miss Litton. Curtain up at two, and final curtain at four-thirty, and in between those times she has five complete changes of costume. I've got to see you again today—wait! I could be back at the flat by five for a couple of hours. Here's the key; let yourself in and meet me there. Agreed?"

"Yes, I'll do that," he said. "I never thought of using the house. It's a big undertaking. I'll try and get the thing sorted out in my mind. Don't be over-enthusiastic, Mary; I may turn it down."

"Go now. I'll be there later."

He went straight to her flat and spent the rest of the afternoon polishing everything that could be polished. Her silver was good, and its soft gleam satisfied him as he laid the table for their meal.

At a quarter to five he made a pile of hot buttered toast. He chopped mushrooms and beat eggs, ready to start omelettes the minute he heard the door open, hoping fervently that she wouldn't be late.

He heard her step, and whistled as he poured the beaten egg into the pan; then heard her joyous exclamation as she saw the table laid.

She came into the kitchen.

"Now what can you be doing? . . . Oh, supper ready! What heaven! And omelettes! Eddie, you angel."

"I've started the coffee percolator," he said. "You'd probably rather have tea—I never think of such things until it's too late. Now don't watch me, Mary, or I'll turn out this thing fit only for the alley cats."

"I don't care," she said. "It's my dream fulfilled, to come home to a hot meal. This *has* been a lucky day."

She went to take off her hat and coat, singing at the top of her voice a popular song. She had a charming singing voice, rich and true.

As they ate she said, with a diffidence that in her was surprising, "Against all the rules of reticence I must know. Have you thought about—the project?"

He knew at once what she meant.

"I've been thinking about it all the time."

"So have I, at the theatre. Quite honestly I tried to put Miss Litton into the wrong costume for the third act. The whole idea is

so simple it's frightening; perhaps because we can't believe in anything that isn't hard and complicated. It seemed to come like a bolt from the blue—so obvious. And there was Rollo—the lamb—breathing forth prophecy and getting away with it. You've got a house. You've got the capital to equip it. You want something absorbing to do. Butlers always finish up by running hotels. It's as easy as that."

"It's attractive, you know."

"Oh, Eddie, I'm so glad to hear you say that. Why not have a shot at it? Of course you've got everything to lose, but——"

"You don't gain anything unless you take a risk. And I'm grateful to you, Mary, for not saying it was 'meant'. That's the one word that would put me off; I'm always suspicious of these 'meant' things; ironic little traps to trip you up, as a rule. There's something in this idea of a hotel, but what scares me is that it's such a mighty big thing to take on alone. I haven't got so much confidence in myself, and I don't know if there'd be enough perseverance left when the first enthusiasm wore off. Enthusiasm has a way of springing leaks, and it takes another person to bung them up, or whatever one does with leaks."

"What about me?" she said eagerly. "There'd be my enthusiasm, and between us——" She stopped, and the scarlet rushed to her face. "Eddie, would you have me in this with you? Would you? As housekeeper for your hotel, or odd-job woman, or anything? I'd love it. I'd work all the hours there were."

He looked at her in amazement.

"But what about your present job?"

"I'd be only too ready to get out of that. I told you before I was tiring of it."

"You'd throw the theatre into chaos."

"Oh no. I've no delusions about my importance. They could fill my place tomorrow. Not without screams of temperament, of course, but they could fill it. If you feel you could go on with this, could we possibly go and look at your house? Tomorrow afternoon?"

He nodded, and said there would be no harm in looking.

She lay awake for hours that night, in low spirits, wondering if he would think she had rushed him. It made her feel quite cold to realise that—as usual—she had made all the running. Impulsively she had told him too much about herself, and he had not fallen into the same error. She called herself every kind of a fool.

The next time they met she said, "Oh Eddie, do you feel I've rushed you into this? It's the last thing I meant. I've been so worried."

"If you've rushed me," he said, "you chose the psychological moment for your rushing. I was hovering, and I needed the push. Those two days I was away from you I did all the wrong things—

things I never want to do again. If we can make a go of this plan together it'll be thanks to you."

"Oh, what a relief! I breathe again."

"Come on," he said. "Let's go and see the house."

4

"The minute I saw it," she said, "the whole thing became real. It was more like a dream before then."

"I felt the same way," he said. "There's something reassuring about solid bricks and mortar. I looked at it and thought, 'That's *my* place.' I never even felt an urge to go and look at it before; I never should have done but for you."

They strolled along Chelsea Embankment, making plans.

"I was frightened to go inside," she confessed. "I thought, 'Supposing the whole of the inside wants pulling out and remaking? Supposing it's the sort of house that couldn't be made into a hotel except by spending the kind of fortune *you* haven't got?' Did you feel like that?"

"I didn't. I don't think it's a man's angle."

"Well, you be thankful for that. I died a thousand deaths as we stood on the doorstep, that first time. And there it was! Made to be a hotel—our sort of hotel. Glorious, golden luck. I could just see our guests coming down that lovely wide staircase."

"Up and down, up and down, with their little suitcases."

"Not a bit," she said with determination. "We're not going to be a one-night place. We're going to make friends with our guests. Residents! Really nice people—and by nice I don't mean rich and important, but amusing and compatible. We can let nine rooms, and that leaves an attic for you and one for me. The drawing-room is lovely, and the dining-room is as dark as the pit, but the food will be so luscious they won't notice their surroundings. We shall need new up-to-date kitchen equipment. I'll do the cooking, and——"

"Oh no. It's too much of a bind for you."

"The kitchenmaid can cope with lunches."

"Mary, you're going miles too far ahead——"

"Shut up, darn you! Can't you see I'm having the time of my life? You'll do reception, accounts, *maitre d'hôtel*, head waiter, and the sort of host who's always ready to hear their joys and troubles. You'll be too busy ever to notice what I'm doing. Our guests will go and tell their friends, 'You should see our place—it's heaven.'"

"Not in those antediluvian beds!"

"But new beds, of course. And we'll thin out the furniture. A lot of it is good old stuff and should fetch its price. Instead of it we'll buy something lighter, more functional. Have you got your list? My notebook's full already."

They went to a nearby café for tea.

Mary said, "The tenants have been very co-operative. They say

we can go in any time, only they bar decorators yet. Can't blame them. They'll be out on May twenty-fifth. Do you think I should give up my present job at once?"

"No, you carry on till then. I'll see to things."

She folded her hands on the table.

"Eddie, do you like this? Do you still like it? If I thought I was going too far——"

"Oh, you're always going too far. You've done nothing but take my breath away. But I think I'm as keen as you are. If I could stop doubting myself—my own capacity."

Her eyes softened, became kindly derisive.

"Eddie, you've got all the capacity there is, and you know it. Only you can't throw off the self-deprecating habit of years in a few weeks. No one could. You can't believe the tide has turned."

"I'm relying altogether too much on you."

"Well, for pity's sake, why not? To use a phrase I hate, I won't let you down."

"I don't believe you will. And that takes some saying—from me."

Her air became relaxed and easy.

"What are we going to call the hotel?"

"18 Ryde Square, Chelsea."

"Horror! It sounds like a Home—one of those discreet places where unmentionable things go on; or like 'delivered in our plain vans'. Would you object to calling it after my uncle's village, where we first met?"

"I never even knew the name of that village."

"Croome. Croome Hotel. Yes?"

"Agreed and carried."

"Croome Hotel—it tastes pleasant and seems to bring it to life. By the way, Mercia Litton says why don't I take you to meet her, and see the play. I could get you a stall on Thursday. Will you come?"

"I'd like to very much. What is she like?"

"Little. Formidable. Never stops talking. Looks twenty-two on the stage, official age thirty-five, real age an imponderable like Cleopatra's Needle. Three husbands, two children at boarding-school; adores domesticity but never had any. Within five minutes makes you feel you're the only person in the world she ever had an affinity for."

But on Thursday Mercia Litton, who was having one of her off-days, hardly came up to her description.

She was subdued, *distracte*.

She said, "So you're the man who's robbing me of Mary. I loathe you. Where is this hotel?"

"In Chelsea," he said. "And it isn't even a hotel yet, only a pipe dream."

"I shall recommend it to everybody I know; and I hope it dies on

you. Why don't you fill it with decayed stage people? All the old women who never played Juliet, and the old men who drew thousands to see *An Ideal Husband*, *East Lynne*, and the *Sign of the Cross*? You'd see some incredible death-beds. I'm nearly qualifying for one myself. Mary's the only person who can get me into those damned riding-boots in the first act. Why can't you run your blasted hotel by yourself?"

"It's Mary's own choice," he said.

"Oh, all right, all right. Everyone to their own form of perdition. But I haven't given a good performance since I heard the news, and I don't think I'll ever give another. You've upset Rollo too, because he's secretly in love with Mary. He nearly broke my collar-bone in the love scene last night."

"This is good," Mary said, "considering she's never appreciated me till now."

"Appreciate? My sweet, I give you a thousand blessings. What more can I do? A thousand blessings, all barbed with the tongues of vipers. And now get out of my dressing-room, dissolute man, and sit in your stall and gaze at the woman you've ruined."

When Mary met him after the show, she said, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing." His face was shocked, ghastly.

"My pity! Don't evade me. You look sicker than the play could make you. You shan't tell me it's nothing. It makes a rotten rag of our friendship."

He said, "I saw somebody at the interval. It was a shock. I've no right to show it, much less inflict it on you."

"Walk home with me," she said. "If it's passed off by the time we get to the flat, all right. If it hasn't passed off, I'll give you a drink."

They went back to her flat without talking.

"Coming in?" she said.

"I'm not very good company."

"You're not going off to your place to be bad company to yourself. Just a drink!"

They went in, and she made coffee for him.

"There. And don't think you're keeping me up, because I can sleep till ten tomorrow."

She pitched her hat into a corner, and hummed as she stirred the fire. He walked up and down the room, struggling to bury a pale something that scrabbled and writhed as he forced down its coffin lid. The whole thing burst open and he was overwhelmed. He flung himself into a chair and for a moment covered his eyes with both hands; then dragged them away and sat staring at nothingness.

"Eddie!" she said, laying the poker down and taking a step towards him. "Oh, Eddie!"

A groan came from his lips; then he suddenly pulled himself together.

"Oh God, I don't know what possessed me! But I've got a lump here." He touched his heart. "It's been here for years, tight and hard. Nothing melts it. And tonight it burns like fire. Mary, stop me—don't let me talk like this!"

"Talk," she said. "Just talk, Eddie. Let it come."

"For years," he said. "This poison. This bitterness. And tonight——"

"Tonight? Go on——"

He looked down a stony avenue of time and saw a young fresh-faced man standing at the gates of Merryns for the first time, with hope and loving-kindness in his heart. A young man with hands and heart open to give and give and give. And he felt again the biting drag of the years that were to come.

Merryns!

He said, "It's a long time ago. I was only twenty-two——"

"Yes, Eddie? Not long after we first met."

"Not so long after we first met. I went to a place called Merryns—a great house. Lord Cedely's house——"

It began there. His first meeting with Isobel. The children. The happiness. The sunlit peace of that first heavenly summer, with the golden light on the lawns and the tinkle of cups under the cedar tree, and the gentle family atmosphere

He did not think how he was telling it, it tumbled out with many pauses and hesitations.

He kept nothing back as he told the story of himself and Isobel; not even thoughts and dreams. Isobel, always Isobel. His faithfulness and betrayal. The whole story of Merryns lay tumbled there, and he picked up the pieces from the ruins. And afterwards—Guy killed; Barty killed; the rest scattered.

"So it was Isobel you saw tonight," she said quietly.

"No, it was Matthew. He's Lord Cedely now."

. . . He had gone to the promenade bar at the second interval. It was packed with people. At once he had seen Matthew, and Matthew had seen him. They had been face to face; Matthew's party were up against the bar.

There was swift recognition, and then a pause.

"Hullo," Matthew said, with casual vagueness. "Haven't seen you for an age. How are you getting on?"

"All right. How are you?"

"No complaints. Well—so long——" He nodded dismissal.

Edward turned away, but couldn't get out for the crowd.

He heard one of Matthew's friends say, "Who's the chap, Cedely?"

"Oh, some old servant of ours who used to be at Merryns when I was a kid. For the life of me I couldn't remember the fellow's name. You know how it is—embarrassing, what?" . . .

Mary said, "That *would* have to happen."

"Well, don't pity me. I suppose I brought it on myself."

"Which is hurting you worse? Tonight's slap, or the old wound?"

"I suppose it's like having a plaster ripped off a wound before it's healed."

"At the risk of your hating me," she said, "and flinging me off for ever, don't you know that Isobel was a rotten person?"

"Self-absorbed. Not a rotten person. You didn't know her, how beautiful her personality was."

"What I can't understand," she said, "is how anyone can go on feeding on a dead unreciprocated love for so many years."

"It wasn't like that," he answered. "I think the love died instantly. But she had destroyed me. It was the *way* she destroyed me. Merryns! Mannot! Me! It was something that Kinryce couldn't do. She did it. I was utterly degraded."

"Kinryce?"

"That's another story. That left no wounds. Well, the war came just right for me. I wonder if anybody else would say that? It came just right. I was able to release my bitterness, to leave it lying around in great chunks. And there was still more and more where that came from. I never got to the end of it; there was no end. I was breeding bitterness like little maggots breed."

He got up and walked from the chair to the hearth, then across the room and back again.

He went on, "I hadn't any pity for either the *killers* or the *killed*, until I heard of Guy's and Barty's deaths. That brought me up short; but in the end all it did was to give a more personal flavour to my killing. I don't know if it sounds strange to you, but I never had any ideas about getting killed myself. Whatever I was rotten with, it wasn't with fear—there just wasn't room for it—and what you don't fear can't get you. There were only two things I was good at, destruction and playing cards! I always got on well with Chris Woodman, and after we were demobbed he asked me to go and live with him, to look after him. In Ryde Square, with two queer old servants. He'd taken his mutilation badly; he was a very sensitive, irascible chap, with a passion for sport, and you can't box, steeple-chase, or play Rugby football with one arm, one leg, and half a lung. The doctors gave him two years to live, he lived for four. We hardly ever went out. People came in to play cards and billiards. With his one arm he was a better billiards player than most people with two, and he had an ingenious little rack made to hold his cards."

He stopped for a moment, and Mary saw with relief that his torrent of talk had mercifully led him right away from the dangerous places into a mere recital of events. He did not seem aware of this.

He went on, "Well, Woodman died. That was a break-up for me, throwing me on my own resources for the first time back in civilian life. I let the house and invested the money. In those days I was still burning up with energy that had to be released. I took job after job

—all failures. Then the last failure of all, when I failed myself. The rest is a history of humiliation, of degradation. I might have spared you as much as I've said already."

"What a good thing it's over!" she said. "What a good thing!" "Over?"

"I said, what a good thing it's over. Don't pace! Come and sit down—that's better."

"It's all right," he said, "saying that anything's over, but you can't discount the past like that. It leaves ugly marks."

"Eddie, when were you born?" she asked.

He looked surprised.

"Eighteen-eighty."

"And I was born in eighty-two. It's rather unfortunate for people of our age, because we were born and bred in the atmosphere of the theory of condemnation. Self-condemnation and social condemnation. Everything questionable that you did or said was done up in labelled packets and hung round your person for life—the way some people tie a dead hen round the neck of the dog that killed it—until by middle-age you were completely clogged and weighed down, and that was in every sense that matters the end of you! People of the present day have a happier philosophy. The theory is that you are supplied with a pair of spiritual scissors, so that you can cut the strings and let the little corpses drop, and get your soul free. That's all there is to it, Eddie. Understood?"

"I think so," he said. "You talk like a charm."

She could see the tense lines of his forehead smoothing out under her shrewd gaze, the corded muscles of his jaw relaxing, the eyes losing their steely glitter.

"Oh well," he said at last. "Barty and Guy wouldn't have forgotten my name—or pretended to. Nor would Rollin Burkley. But they're the dead; they don't count any more."

"Oh, Eddie," she broke out at once, "I don't think you should make too much of that. I know it stung you, but I have a lot of sympathy with the person who makes that kind of slip. I do it myself, meet a person I knew well years ago, and the name's on the tip of my tongue, and the devil of it is I can't get it out."

"Yes, but not a person who was close to you—or thought he was close. But Matthew was so very much Lord Cedely, you could see it sticking out of him. And he'd coarsened. When your senses are keyed up you can tell an awful lot about a person from a single glance. At first I saw the Matthew I used to know and care for, and then in an instant the Matthew he'd become, like the way that Jekyll went into Hyde in the cinema film. All this in a flash. And I was only saved by instinct from making the appalling *faux pas* of calling him by his Christian name. I should have been immediately frozen. As it is, I think he would have been better pleased if I'd remembered to say 'your lordship'. However, it's all over now.

I've learned my lesson. Let's make it a closed subject. We'll take the dead hen off the poor dog's neck and let him go. The brute's been punished enough. He'll never do it again."

He turned to look at Mary, and saw that her eyes were swimming in tears and her cheeks blotched with them

"What have I done to you, Mary? Don't cry for me. I don't deserve it." He gave her a sudden sweet and engaging smile, like a man coming out of an anaesthetic and realising that he is still alive.

"I was so certain," she said, "that it was Isobel you saw. I'm glad it wasn't"

"On the whole," he said, "I'd rather it had been Isobel. I had some illusions about Matthew, but I could have faced Isobel, because I haven't any softer feelings towards her at all. No illusions or expectations."

He glanced at the clock.

"Look at the time! Twenty to one. How I've talked, and kept you. Can you ever forgive me?"

"There's no forgiving about it. I'm glad you told me. At least we're real friends now, with everything told between us"

"I don't know how to thank you"

"What for? I haven't said a helpful word, so far as I can recollect I felt very inadequate"

"I couldn't have told another soul on earth but you. That's something."

She got up

"Shall I make you anything before you go?"

"No, no. Don't bother"

"There are just a few business details——"

They talked over a few items that needed attention before their next meeting at the hotel, and she went down the stairs with him to show him out.

The sky was thick with stars in the dark ethereal blue; a great world of peace and silence lying there above, only separated from the city's tumult by man's human limitations.

He rested his hand for a minute on her shoulder.

"Well—good night, Mary."

"Good night. Bless you"

5

It was July before the work on the hotel was completed and they could consider opening.

They rarely had the place to themselves, for Mary's friends were bursting with curiosity and turned up in droves

"Darling, the pitfalls! Have you thought of the pitfalls? I must warn you, in a residential hotel, don't let yourself be inundated by fearsome old women of both sexes. Malignant old women who

haven't any friends. Hissing Medusas. They'll eat your nice hotel up. Nobody else will come near it."

Mary said that great care was being exercised over the bookings, and any applications that had a Medusa-like smell were rejected.

"Who was that?" Edward asked.

"Bertie Ivoe. He's in the orchestra at Drury Lane. He blows something. He has a reputation as a philosopher, and he knows interesting people who live in hotels, so we should listen to him reverently."

Someone else said, "How beautifully clean and airy! Weren't you lucky to walk into such a place?"

Edward and Mary exchanged glances, remembering the long June days when they had scrubbed and cleaned, torn up carpets, unhooked curtains, mended and tacked and hammered and scoured; hardly finding time to look out upon mystical summer evenings of blue and gold, and trees in the square making a tracery across the sunset.

All the initial work had been done by them, for in their enthusiasm it was like a game.

"Anyone would think we were mad," said Mary, looking at her bruised and reddened hands, "not even to engage scrub-women. What's the matter with us?"

"Pride of possession?"

"Well, whatever it is, I'm glad you feel the same as I do. Partly, I don't *want* anybody else to touch the place; I want to feel we did it all ourselves. And partly there's that ridiculous notion that nobody can do it as well as we can."

"Nobody *could*!"

They were standing in the kitchen, into which the new cooker and other equipment had been moved that day. They had painted the walls ivory white and picked out the woodwork in light blue. "A mad scheme for a hotel kitchen," Mary said, "but it's my choice and I love it, and I'm prepared to keep it spotless, so who cares?"

"Oh Mary," he said, "I feel as if I'd come alive. It's just the effort of working for something worth while."

She flashed him an understanding smile.

"And, of course, working independently. I suppose, Eddie, it's the first time in your life you've ever worked for yourself?"

"It is! I never thought of that. For myself. I'm independent and free. I shall never again have to give myself, the whole of myself, as I used to do."

"Oh, don't say that. It sounds so self-centred—like hardening one's self up. I know you don't mean it that way, and I know that once you were over-generous, but that couldn't be a bad thing. All that giving of yourself can never be lost."

"It came very near to being lost. As I did too."

"You're going back in your thoughts again to Merryns. You keep

on going back, and possibly you always will. But, Eddie, can't you ever put away the bitterness?"

He gave her a gentle look.

"I have put away the bitterness, Mary. Because of you. You've made me see that it was just another of life's experiences. Don't you worry about all that."

Mary herself had dealt with their attic rooms and made them beautiful. His had white walls and a carpet of Venetian red. The chest and wardrobe were of dark oak. On one side of the bed stood a bookcase with a shaded lamp upon it; on the other a small table with a radio. Her own was done in cream and blue. The furnishing had cost very little, but could not have been more tasteful and attractive.

They talked with smiling confidence about ways and means.

"So it's all spent!" Mary would say. "All your life's savings and your legacy, and my life's savings. We've blued it all on our prospects. Gamblers, we are; blooming awful gamblers. And here we stand and grin."

"Something to grin about," he said gaily.

"Glad you think so, Mr Shrewsbury! Suppose nobody likes our poor little hotel?"

"They'll be queer people if they don't, what with my management and your cooking. And talking about cooking, you've got to have an assistant. That's definite, so don't go prattling about saving another lot of wages. We'll start as we mean to go on. And one of these days we'll have a chef."

She pretended to be touchy.

"Oh. So you want a chef. You think my cooking will be just bearable until we can afford a chef. Until we've lost our good name as a hotel. You'd better get your chef now, I'm walking out."

At his horrified glance she burst out laughing, and they both roared helplessly.

When it came to engaging staff he was rather concerned at the happily casual way in which she proposed to find jobs for some of her old friends.

"There's Dolly Withers—she was a pet. Used to be with me at Drury Lane. She's got a bit past it, but she'd be a treasure in the kitchen, and she loves messing about with pots and pans. I must look her up. And she's got a niece who might do for our chambermaid. Used to be in the chorus, but her husband's an invalid and she's got a baby now. What *was* that girl's name? Lorna? Laura? Lorraine? Something like that. She wouldn't need to sleep in, and she's very reliable, I do know that. Oh, and Millie Delayne! She used to be a waitress before she got the idea that she was a musical-comedy star. That didn't last. She'd be quite glad to be a waitress again now, if she was working for me. She's my age, but makes up younger, and——"

"Look, Mary," Edward said in desperation. "I hate to interrupt,

but we're not casting a Drury Lane drama now; we're staffing a hotel. And we've got to have experienced staff. They not only do their work in half the time that amateurs do, but they also know their place and they don't try to be matey with the management. That's quite a point, as you'll find out. I do know a bit about this job, and——"

"Amateurs!"

He groaned. "Good heavens! I shouldn't have used that word. It's a red rag to theatrical people, but I didn't mean it that way. Try and forget the theatre, Mary; this is something quite different."

"But they'd be good, and I could rely on them because I know them!"

"Well, let's compromise. Let me engage the assistant cook and the waitress and a kitchenmaid or man who knows the job, and you can have your ex-chorus girls in the bedrooms——"

Her eyebrows shot up. "Really, Mr Shrewsbury!"

He was reduced to laughter again.

"Oh, go on with you! Engage your Dolly or your Lorraine or whatever it is, only she'll have to wear neat uniform if she works in my hotel; I won't have her floating about dressed like an odalisque——"

He stopped abruptly. She said with mock cynicism, "Do go on. Don't tell me you're stuck for words. Not you!"

"I was just wondering who our first guests were going to be. If we'd like them. If they'd be the right kind of people."

"Oh." She smiled. "I've been working. We've got our first four already, and they're only waiting for us to open the front door. Miss Litton is sending us an uncle and aunt of hers—they're the sweetest people, I've met them. And also two retired stage people: George Merchant, the comedian, who's as solemn as a judge in private life and studies Egyptology, and Marjorie Naylor——"

"The Marjorie Naylor!"

"Yes. The *grande dame* of the English stage. You'll love her. That's a good beginning, isn't it?"

He was silent.

"Now what's the matter? Worried about the odalisque question?"

"I was thinking again how much I owe you, Mary."

"Fiddle!"

She went out into the scullery and returned with a cardboard carton.

"I wanted to show you these. I didn't have time before. Picked them up yesterday."

Two small tabby kittens looked up at him, round-eyed and cheeky.

"Aren't they sweet, Eddie? Every hotel has to have a cat. The guests love it."

"Two cats apparently."

"I couldn't choose, so I brought them both. They'll be company

for each other and for me. I shall spoil them to death." She picked the tiny creatures up and nestled one against each cheek.

"I was thinking," he said, "that I'd have liked a dog. I always wanted to have a dog of my own."

"Well, why not? Get a puppy, and we'll bring the children up together."

"Are we going to have time for all these animals?"

"Everybody's got time for animals. Get one tomorrow. Go to the Battersea Dogs' Home and pick one out. You'll probably come back with two—or six or eight."

"On second thoughts," he said, "we'll let the dog wait."

6

He had been lying awake at night in one of those reactions that follow excitement, thinking to himself, Well now you've done it. All your money gone to the last cent, and plenty of bills yet to come in. What happens next? Supposing we can't make it? Supposing we're sold up? Mary goes back to the theatre, and I to the scrapheap.

The kind of thoughts that attack the bravest at three o'clock in the morning.

Then suddenly, like a dawning light, it came. Pride of possession! Up to then Mary had been the leading spirit; hers was the drive and the initiative. Now he was filled with a new feeling. This place was his! His own—his very own. And here he was, in his own place, free and independent and strong and healthy. Why, he had everything in the world!

For the first time in years a flood of joy filled him. He couldn't lie in bed. He wanted to tell somebody, to shout it out—Look at me! I'm on top of the world. I've got where I wanted to be.

Yes, after all those years of defeat and failure he had really got somewhere. He was on his feet. He had done it!

My place! My triumph! Nothing could keep *me* down—not down for ever.

The old self-doubt and hampering sense of failure were gone; this was a simple reaction. He had gone in spirit violently from one extreme to the other.

He got up and went to the window, but it was still too dark for even a glimmering of dawn. That did not damp his ardour. He felt a new man. Edward Shrewsbury, hotel proprietor, with a fine place, a valuable property, servants to do as he told them, guests to serve; the prospect of kindling warmth in this house, of creating an atmosphere of peaceful and happy prosperity.

"It's good!" he said aloud. "I've got this far, I'll go further. I'll make this a remarkable place; I'll make it pay. It'll be the kind of place that people will tell their friends about. Shrewsbury's place! The Croome Hotel. The best residential hotel in Chelsea. I can't wait to begin. What an opportunity!"

He dressed and went downstairs, passing from room to room and touching the furniture lovingly in the first pale light of dawn; looking with pride at the new carpets, the gleam of mirrors, the circle of easy-chairs in the lounge, the tables ready in the dining-room. He peeped into the stillroom, the linen-room. All ready and waiting for use. There was the storeroom with its scrubbed shelves, soon to be stocked; and here was the spotless kitchen which would soon be a hive of industry.

He thought of his small office with the desk and the new account-books; the visitors' book with its gold lettering, Croome Hotel, and its blank pages on which names would be written. Many names. Names that meant people—his guests.

My hotel! All mine. This is the beginning of life, I never felt like this before I did this—I, Edward Shrewsbury. This is the first real achievement of my life.

It was more than pride, it was a kind of intoxication. He exulted, carried away by an untried mood that was nothing short of self-glorification. His theme was, alone I did it. Others worked, but I was the leader. I planned it, I made it.

It was an unworthy thought, but he couldn't see that. It was thrilling.

He put on the kettle to make tea; it was six o'clock. The last few hours had slipped by like a charm. The staff was coming in today, and this was the last time he would have to make his own tea. Tomorrow it would be brought to him—to the proprietor!

Mary came into the kitchen.

"Eddie! You would go and get up early when I was going to surprise you with a cup of tea."

"But I got here first. The kettle's boiling. Mary, I must tell you. Everything has suddenly changed for me. I've woken up, come to life, call it what you like. I've suddenly realised what this place means to me; the fact that it's mine."

"But it's always been yours."

"A thing isn't yours until you possess it in your heart. I've got the Croome now, and it's got me. I'm full of plans. There's a lot I want you to do——"

"You've only to tell me."

"I will—soon. This place is going to be a success."

She gave him a quizzical glance.

"I never assumed that it would be anything else."

"No, but up to this morning *I'd* never been quite sure. I had so many hesitations and doubts. Now I *know*; I'm convinced. There's a world of difference between your telling me that I'm capable of anything, and my knowing it myself. Now I feel as if I could push the world round the other way if need be. I feel as if nothing could stop me."

I, I, I! How like a man! Her eyes were indulgent.

"It's great to hear you talk like that, Eddie. This is what I hoped would happen, that you'd find yourself, with experience added to give substantiality. It's come to you at last. How did it happen?"

He poured her cup of tea and his own.

"I don't know. I was feeling rather low in the small hours of the morning when quite suddenly conviction came. A great sense of what I'd achieved. It was like a gift from heaven. Why didn't I see it before?"

"You've made a great come-back, Eddie."

"You've helped, of course."

"Do you realise," she said, "that this is the last time? Tomorrow we'll have a kitchenmaid to make our tea and bring it up."

"I was thinking that. And next week there'll be guests."

"It's so wonderful. And yet I've enjoyed the hard work. It's been fun."

"Yes, and worth all the labour. The place looks lovely."

"Worth all we've put into it, and all we're going to put. We're not going to spare ourselves, Eddie."

"No. I believe in giving the extra bit all the time. From the first minute, my guests are going to get all I've got, nothing stunted."

She chucked her cup against his.

"Cheers! Sounds as if we're not going to make much money, giving the guests the profits."

"Who cares about money? If I can pay my debts and remain solvent, and have a happy place with nice people to serve, what else matters?"

"I'm with you every time. This is it, Eddie. All the best!"

His eyes sparkled like a schoolboy's.

"Let's make some toast and call this breakfast. I want to get busy, I can't wait. And today I shall go out and order the stores."

She said merrily, "All right, if you want it that way. We'll compile the list of stores together; and then I'll unpack that nice new china and wash it—and be ready to greet my kitchenmaid when she appears. To say nothing of my assistant cook. I only hope she isn't a paragon to terrify me. But first of all I must feed my cats!"

He left her bending over the kittens' basket. He felt that no one could quite understand, much less share, his experience of early morning. This was his day, his special day.

But even greater satisfaction was in store for him, on the night he saw his dining-room filled. The seven double bedrooms were let, and the two singles. The sixteen guests sat at their separate tables, upon which gleamed fine linen, polished silver, and bright crystal. On each Mary had placed a tiny bowl of summer flowers, and a small menu-holder she had made herself from twisted silver wire. She had typed the menus too, having somehow in the past few weeks found time to teach herself to do so.

The service hatch was open; the waitress—a dark, attractive girl

of serious disposition but undoubted efficiency—was ready in her faultless black and white.

The dinner would be a good one, for both Edward and Mary were determined to serve nothing but the best of food. Now Beryl was going round briskly with the mushroom soup—delicately prepared by Mary herself, for she would not tolerate anything out of a tin; and full of delight at what he saw, Edward slipped into the lounge to tidy the chairs and switch on the electric fire. Mary had done the flowers in there too, pink gladioli and blue larkspur. The previous night, though tired, she had made a long journey to a friendly dealer she knew in Soho who would let her have them fresh and cheap.

From there he went down to the kitchen to carve the chickens. All was in order there and ready for him, and Mary, weary but triumphant, smiled as he came in.

"Did they seem to like the soup?"

"They certainly looked as if they did. Those chickens look good."

"Good? They're perfect. And Mrs Lea has done the lemon mousse, and there are cherry tartlets too."

"Oh, do call me Alison," said the assistant cook. She and Mary were already on happy terms together.

The kitchenmaid, a willing Cockney girl called Maud, was dishing up peas and potatoes expertly into the small individual dishes. Mary turned busily to the cooker.

"The gravy—here, Maud—and the bread sauce. I hope it's as good as it smells. This is what is known as 'cooking for numbers', and though I've never done it before, it seems a case of blissful ignorance being rewarded, for it's all turned out well. That's right, Alison; you can put out the sweets into the trifle glasses. Mr Shrewsbury, aren't you going up to see about the wines?"

He made a startled exclamation. "I nearly forgot——"

Later, with his ears pricked as the guests went from dining-room to lounge, he overheard flattering remarks and expressions of contentment.

He himself served the coffee, and his attentions were smilingly—if warily—received, for naturally no one was going to commit himself to open approval at this early date. The guests were thinking, All very well for a start, but are they going to keep up the standard?

While they drank their coffee, Edward moved about unobtrusively, slipping an extra cushion into the chair of one, drawing a reading lamp nearer to the man with the newspaper, setting up a card-table as he overheard a party of four suggesting bridge. It occurred to him at the same time that the dark little room at the back of the house, up to now unallocated and filled with extra furniture, would make an ideal bridge-room and could be permanently so arranged; an additional attraction for the guests. He must remember to tell Mary to clear it out tomorrow.

An elderly man near the radio was inspecting it thoughtfully. Edward demonstrated the controls.

"Thank you," said the man. "You're very attentive."

"I just want you to be comfortable, sir."

"If what I've experienced since I came is typical of your hotel, then I certainly shall be comfortable. The places I've been in! Cold lounges, cold bath-water, and a cold reception for one's justifiable complaints. My wife isn't very strong; she has to have her comforts."

"My housekeeper will see that she has them," Edward said. "Please tell her not to be afraid to ask for anything she wants. We're here to serve you."

"Well, those are reassuring words. Do you mind if I comment on the charming arrangement of those flowers? I love flowers, and when I had a garden of my own I always used to pick and arrange them for my home."

"My housekeeper did those," said Edward with a smile. "I'll tell her you admired them. She'll be pleased. Would you care for more coffee?"

"I should—if two cups are permitted"

"As many as you like, sir."

A few of the guests retired to their rooms to read or write in privacy. Edward was happy about those too, for the bedrooms had each an easy-chair, a table, a bookshelf, and a slot-meter electric fire.

It was midnight when he went upstairs himself, and found Mary still busily engaged on several details for the next day.

He stretched his shoulders and rubbed his fingers through his hair.

"Glory, it's exhausting!" Mary said. "But isn't it fun?"

"Now don't you go and overdo it. Get to bed, Mary, do. Surely some of those details can wait?"

"The pot calling the kettle black," she said gaily. "But they do seem to appreciate everything. I helped Loretta with the beds, and they looked so pretty turned down and the bedlights on. I must remind her in the morning to label the hot-water bottles before she takes them downstairs. It must be maddening to get somebody else's hot-water bottle."

"Mary! Will you please go to bed?"

"In a minute. Did they say they liked the dinner?"

"Not directly to me; they were being cautious, and I don't blame them. But I overheard them talking to one another about it, and they seemed pleased. And old Mr Marshall congratulated me on the arrangements, and told me to tell you how he admired your flowers."

"Oh, I'm glad. Yes, I *will* go to bed—it's just that for the first few nights I must supervise everything. When Loretta has had a bit of experience I'll be able to leave more to her."

"Good night, Mary."

"Good night, Eddie. Sleep well!"

He slept profoundly, and woke to find the kitchenmaid beside him, offering early tea. The hotel was launched.

7

After a year of strenuous and absorbing work he said to Mary, "Well, we're clear of debt, and the accounts are most satisfactory, though there isn't going to be a fortune in it."

"We're over-generous," she said. "What can we expect? But on the other hand we've got a home and exciting work that we enjoy; our rooms have always been filled, and we have a waiting list of people who want to come to us when we have a vacancy—which seems remote. And we've made a lot of friends, which I think is the best of all."

They were both extremely popular. Edward had turned the small garden at the back of the house into a flagged court set out with comfortable chairs and low tables, and in the hot summer weather this was an attractive outdoor sitting-room. When he carried afternoon tea out there he found it difficult to get away again, for everybody tried to make him stay and talk.

A Mr and Mrs Buchanan had recently arrived, retired people who were waiting for their home in Scotland to be renovated for them.

"We shall be here for several months," Mr Buchanan said to Edward. "It's a huge place we're going to—a family inheritance entailed on me, so we have to keep it up; but after the welcome we've received from you and the comfort and peace here, we shall be sorry to leave when the time comes. How long have you been running this place?"

"Only a year, sir."

"You seem very experienced in making your guests feel at home. Been in the hotel business all your life, I suppose?"

"No. I used to be a butler. I was in good houses before the war, and I suppose I learned the knack."

Buchanan smiled.

"Ah, that accounts for it. But you won't make a fortune if you try to run your hotel on the lavish lines of the old country houses—as you seem to be doing."

"I don't want a fortune. I want a happy place and people to look after. That's always been my line."

"Your housekeeper's a charming woman. She's been tireless in doing little things for my wife."

"Miss Vincent? Oh, she's a treasure. She does most of the cooking too. She loves hard work."

"That's something new in these days. English pride in craftsmanship, and tradition of the best and most gracious kind seem to have slipped down the drain since the war. It's hard on people like us, who are not so young now, and remember the past. We're too old to adapt ourselves. It's a great thing to find a haven like this."

Edward laughed. "I hope you'll still think it a haven after you've been here a few months."

"Oh, I don't doubt that. We had glowing recommendations before we came. My wife feels happy and settled here, and I shall slip up to Scotland occasionally to see how they're going on at the castle. A great place, four square in the ancient style, with pepper-pot towers. I only hope there's another butler of your kind left in the world when I come to engage one."

"I'm sure there will be."

"Can't you sit down and chat a little?"

"I don't see why I shouldn't, sir."

"And don't call me 'sir'. Let's be host and guest, because this is really more like a home than a hotel."

"I like to hear you say that. That's what I've aimed at."

He had learned the art of never appearing busy to his guests. Needless to say, his time was fully occupied with organising, though by now he found that he was lucky in his staff. It was a long time since he had even entered the kitchen or troubled about the actual domestic details; he left all that to Mary. Sometimes it did occur to him that she was carrying a big load, but she did so gracefully and seemed to thrive on it. Certainly she had never complained or demanded more leisure, though he would have been the first to admit that in the hotel business he had got the smooth end of the stick and Mary the rough. She always seemed happy, and the women guests loved her, for she was never too tired to listen to their troubles and their stories of 'when I had my own home', and she would cheerfully run up and down stairs attending to their wants.

Her only luxury was her three-to-four hour in the afternoon, when she would go to her room with a cup of tea and the newspaper.

One afternoon she came to him in the office where he was making up weekly accounts. She had a newspaper in her hand, and pointed to a paragraph.

"I wondered if this would be the Sonia you told me about. You said she had married Viscount Thirlwood."

The paragraph said that Viscountess Thirlwood would preside at a meeting in Chelsea for the League of Nations.

He looked interested. "Yes, I suppose that will be Sonia."

"I wondered if you would care to go—just to see her. On Thursday night. Or would it bother you? I considered a long time before I showed you this, but I didn't want you to miss the chance."

He studied the paragraph.

"Yes, I think I'd like to see her—from a safe distance."

"Oh, Eddie, don't think she'd be like the Matthew episode over again!"

"I would like to go," he said again.

"Let's go together. We could arrange it. Alison would look after

everything, just for one night; she's perfectly capable. And we haven't been out together since we started this place."

Mary was pleased, for she had a plan which made her heart beat rather fast and guiltily. In her room she took a plain piece of writing-paper, and after a moment's thought wrote: "If you remember Edward Shrewsbury who used to be at Merryns, you might like to know that he will be in the audience on Thursday night."

She addressed an envelope to Viscountess Thirlwood, care of Chelsea Town Hall.

"At least it can do no harm," she thought. "At the worst she can only ignore it, and no one will ever know."

Edward insisted on sitting at the back of the hall. He appeared to be nonchalant, but Mary realised how eagerly he was waiting for the speakers to appear.

He gave a slight involuntary gasp as Viscountess Thirlwood came on and took the centre chair on the platform. His first thought was, that can't be Sonia! She was an immense woman, in her late thirties, slow and rather ponderous in her movements, dressed in rich but rather matronly garments appropriate to her size. But when she lifted her face to look at her audience he knew her at once. Her face, her hair, her eyes had not changed very much; her smile was gay, even impish, the smile of a woman who loved life and found it a joke, loved people and wanted to take them into her confidence. Her voice was full and friendly. He was glad he had come. It ~~did~~ ^{did} him good to see Sonia alive, and holding all these listeners in her hand.

He watched her throughout the proceedings and heard little or nothing of what the speakers were saying.

Just before the meeting closed the secretary made an announcement. Edward did not notice that Mary was sitting up rigid.

"Before we close, here is an announcement. If Mr Edward Shrewsbury is in the audience, will he please come to the secretary's room after the meeting? Mr Edward Shrewsbury."

"Me?" Edward turned puzzled to Mary.

"I don't see who else he could mean but you," she said, trying to look as baffled as he.

"But what on earth—— Good Lord, Mary, you don't suppose the hotel's on fire?"

"It can't be anything bad," she said, "or he'd have made it more urgent."

"But I can't understand——"

"Never mind. You go. I'll wait for you here."

He was gone a quarter of an hour, and when he came back his face was brightly transfigured. He came down the aisle with his eyes on her, hardly able to wait to tell her what had happened.

"Mary, what do you think! It was Sonia. She wanted to see me. I've spoken to her. She's leaving London tomorrow for the South

of France, but she wants me to go round to her hotel first for a chat. I was so overcome I forgot to ask her how she could have known I was here. Surely she couldn't have recognised me so far back?"

"She might have done. I'm awfully glad, Eddie."

"So am I. It's absurd of me to be so happy about it. It's just what I needed."

He saw that Mary was delighted too, but never guessed how she was exulting in the success of her plan.

Sonia received him in her sitting-room.

"This is so nice, Edward. I can't tell you! When I got your note——"

"My—what?"

"The note you sent, saying you'd be at the meeting."

"Oh, that." He saw it in a moment. Mary! What a conspirator she had been!

"Edward, where have you been all these years?"

"There was the war first——"

"Yes, of course. You see, I never had any idea what had happened to you. I always thought you'd gone to America with Isobel."

He was amazed, but soon realised that she couldn't have known what had happened at Middleham.

"I left Isobel the day war broke out. I was in the army for four years."

"In the army! Then you weren't with her at all?"

"I never even heard what happened to her after she went to America."

Sonia shrugged her shoulders.

"She got a divorce from her husband just as soon as she could. I don't know who she's married to now. We had scraps of news from acquaintances over there. I must say I couldn't care less."

He was silent.

Sonia said, "I'm sorry, Edward. You loved her, didn't you? I realised that long ago—possibly no one else in the family did. I suppose she treated you badly—no, don't tell me. I can see that she did. It was cruel."

"I don't think she meant it. She just went her own way."

"She always did. Edward, you heard about Guy—and Barty?"

"During the war. I read it in the papers. It was unbearable."

"Yes. It killed my father, you know. They were so awfully dear to us all. It was strange that my mother should have been the tougher parent and should have survived. I would have thought it would have been the other way round; but Father never showed his feelings, and suffered the more. Mother is living in Ireland now, with some relatives of hers. Matthew is living at Merryns, and has an awful job to keep it up, what with taxes and slack servants. You wouldn't know the place."

"I wouldn't want to," he said. "I shall always think of Merryns

as it was." He decided not to tell her he had met Matthew; it would have involved painful revelations.

"Yes, it was a heavenly home for us all. I shall never forget those days. Did you miss us—after you went away?"

"Miss you!"

She was startled and shocked into silence by the pain in his face and voice; she didn't know what to say. She thought for a moment, and then said quietly, "And now tell me about yourself—as you are today. You don't need to tell me you're a successful person; I can see it."

He obviously had confidence; poise and well-being were in evidence. He looked handsome and well-dressed. She couldn't fail to be impressed.

"It wasn't always so," he said. "When I came out of the army I let myself go—for a time. Then I managed to pull myself up. I was lucky enough to have a house and a little money left to me by a friend. I turned the house into a hotel. It's in Chelsea, and though I don't want to brag about it, it's a nice place."

"I'm sure it is." Her eyes beamed friendly admiration. "Any hotel you ran would be good. And how awfully clever of you!"

"Oh, I don't know——" he said modestly, and added, "I've got a good staff." Even as he said it, he felt a pang of guilt for not having mentioned Mary at all. It seemed wrong that here he had a chance to pay her a tribute and was not doing so. But it would have involved so much explanation; and somehow lately, since he had been able to stand on his own feet and get along without her support, the place she filled in his life was becoming less important as he became more self-sufficient. No need to go into that with Sonia, especially as the memory of the abject state in which Mary had found him was one he would rather forget. It filled him with a shamed feeling, out of keeping with his present well-being, and he even tended to minimise it in retrospect.

"I've ordered a light lunch up here," Sonia was saying. "You'll stay, won't you?"

"Oh, but——"

"Please!" Her voice was winning and eager; it touched him that she should be as pleased to see him as he was to be with her again. "I'll ring for it at once. What a curse that I have to be off to France this very day!"

They sat down to the well-served meal, and she said warmly, "You don't know how much good it does me to know that you're doing so splendidly. I knew misfortune could never get you down; you'd fight back. And you did fight back, Edward. And you got a few lines on your face and a few grey hairs! Haven't we all?"

"You are beautiful," he said sincerely.

"I'm not. I'm a fat, ageing woman of thirty-seven, but I'm a happy one. And you?"

"You mean—am I happy?"

"Is it too naïve to ask anyone if he's happy?"

"But I am! I don't know that there's any greater happiness than that which comes from achievement."

"And all by your own efforts. I couldn't say that about myself; I've been—well, carried through life. But you—I've got so much admiration for you, Edward."

"Don't say that——" He felt slightly uncomfortable, though his pride was flattered.

"If it wouldn't hurt you too much to go back a little," she said hesitatingly, "I would like to tell you how pained I was about—the break between my father and you. He was very wrong, but I don't think he meant to be intolerant. He belonged to the old school—hidebound. I do hope that in the end you were able to understand and forgive him, though you had almost too much to forgive."

"There was no question of needing to forgive him. He was quite right to take the line that he did. I understood—always."

Her eyes were full of tears. "It's fine of you to admit that. But you must have felt very bitter, didn't you? Don't be afraid to tell me."

He wasn't going to burden her with too much of that old story.

He said, "I admit I was bitter for a good many years, but not against your father. It was Isobel; I'd put all my faith in her, and—— Oh, never mind that. But I was fool enough to let my mind and heart be poisoned, and life seemed aimless. Then I dragged myself up—by my bootstraps, so to speak—and emptied out the sour dregs. It was all swept away, and I began again."

"And what did you fill your heart with—then?"

He was surprised at her question and her grave expression.

"I suppose—with new work. Pride of achievement. New self-respect. Success. They're satisfying things."

"Perhaps they are. But just work and pride? That doesn't seem adequate for you, Edward. You see, I know you so well. You were such a giver. What about love?"

"Love?" He looked startled.

"I should say it's the only antidote to bitterness. When that goes out, only love can fill the emptiness and keep the other feeling from returning."

"Well—I love my job. I'm satisfied with life. That should do."

She looked unconvinced, and said, "Everyone's life and needs are his own affair. You know what you need. But I've seen enough of life to realise its problems and its voids, and for myself I couldn't get by without a deep well of loving-kindness on which to draw for sweetness. I've been lucky. I have a loving family."

"I'm awfully glad to know that, Sonia." He paused, for the old name had slipped out. "I'm sorry."

"No, no. You must always call me that. Why not? Heavens,

what a tyke of a child I was! You were like a big brother to us all. Tell me more about your hotel?"

"There's not much to tell. I've tried to make it home-like and to keep up the old traditions of good service and giving the extra bit. The guests seem pleased, and I've made a lot of friends. It's a good life; hard work but very worth while. I'm not out to make money—I never was, thank God. It must be soul-destroying."

"It does me good," she said, "to know that you're all right. It's been wonderful to meet you again—one of the best things that has happened to me in years. I must say good-bye now, because I have to leave for Dover. But when I come back to London I'll let you know and you will come and see me again, won't you?"

"There's nothing I'll look forward to more than that."

Her face was radiant.

"I want you to see my son and daughter. You remember them, how they clung round you in their infancy? Francis is at Winchester and frightfully grown up, and Sylvia at Roedean and lives for hockey. Edward, I must fly, but say it isn't good-bye. Only au revoir!"

He did not see Mary for some hours after he got back to the hotel, for as usual she was up to her eyes in the kitchen, but in the afternoon he met her as she was going up to her room, and said, "You are a low, deceitful woman."

After one startled look the happy gleam in his eyes reassured her. "You found me out? But it was all right?"

"It was wonderful. She was the old Sonia as I remember her. And I'm going to see her again when she's in London."

"I'm so pleased it happened, Eddie. This must have made you happy. And it's wiped out the Matthew episode?"

"Entirely. I don't seem to have a care in the world now. In fact I sometimes wonder if there's a limit to which one's spirits can rise."

She laughed and went off to her work.

As the months went by he seemed to be seeing less of Mary. It was probably inevitable, for her work was below stairs and his above. They were both fully occupied. It was a long, long time since they had had any intimate talk together, and when they met it was because business claimed their joint attention. She came up every day to the office, and at once they would plunge into discussion of her lists of needs; stores, linen and china replacements, peculiar wants of guests, room allocations.

There seemed no need for exchange of confidences. Their friendship, which had begun upon so emotional a level, was bound after many months to relapse into casualness. At the beginning, Edward thought, they had talked too much. He still felt hot as he remembered his lack of reserve, the manner in which he had given himself away, had leaned upon her because he wasn't man enough to solve his own problems. And there had been no need for it, no need at

all. He hadn't really fallen so low as all that. Why, everything he had needed for his rehabilitation had been there at hand, if only he had seen it. And he would have seen it—of course he would. It could only have been a matter of time.

And now they talked too little, though to him it did not seem so. He no longer needed anyone to give him confidence; he didn't require an outlet for any emotional overflowings, for he had none. He was, thank God, self-sufficient. He had his place, and Mary had hers.

The running of the hotel absorbed him. It was no easy task to keep everything up to its original standard, but he was determined to do so. He was constantly looking for fresh markets, new suppliers, for if the food was to be really good, it must have variety and be of the first quality. He would never, for the sake of convenience, deal with a firm so long that they thought they had got him and could push any stuff on to him. He was always seeking something better, the best that could be obtained. And all this must be done lavishly, and yet with studied economy. His books were meticulously kept; he pondered over values, checked and re-checked.

He had become extremely business-like, reserving his lighter moments for friendly conversation with the guests, who found him very much to their taste as a host. He dressed well now and had found it possible to increase his personal allowance, and Mary's, though she had been reluctant to accept any increase for herself. She was still working all the hours there were, and though he had suggested a full-time cook, she had refused, saying that the pay-roll was quite big enough, and that she couldn't trust anybody to run her kitchen as well as she did.

He had the business at his fingertips, and since he had acquired the art of never appearing busy, most people would have concluded that he had an easy life. Often some of the guests would invite him to join their theatre party, or take him out in their cars on a Sunday. He was always ready to do this, and to appear to them carefree and companionable, though his mind was ever planning for the hotel and looking out for things that could be improved. When he could afford it, he intended to have a car of his own. He would then be able to get out into the country and buy direct from the farms.

The women guests seemed fond of Mary, and would occasionally invite her out, but she never seemed to be able to find time to go, and this irritated Edward because it seemed like a reflection on his management.

"Couldn't you possibly spare Miss Vincent for half a day?" Mrs Buchanan, who was a particular fan of Mary's, would say. "Oh, please do, Mr Shrewsbury!"

"It's nothing to do with me," he replied. "Miss Vincent's time is her own. She makes her own arrangements."

"But she always says she never has time."

"If she says so I suppose she means it. But you really mustn't blame me, Mrs Buchanan. I would be glad for her to go."

"In that case, won't you tell her that she simply must come with us to Bognor on Sunday? If you tell her, perhaps——"

"Certainly I'll tell her. I should like her to go."

He said to Mary, "Of course you must go. You need the change. Those people seem to have the idea that I'm inconsiderate to you."

"In that case," she said, "I'll certainly go"

She went with the Buchanans and seemed to enjoy the outing, though her mind was preoccupied, for she was having some staff trouble—one of the usual jealousies—and wanted to keep all knowledge of it from Edward. Harmony below stairs was her business; his to keep the guests happy. It wasn't for him to know that Alison and Maud, the kitchenmaid, were for ever at one another's throats, and because of their individual efficiency found it difficult to live together in peace. Mary only had to slip up so far as to say a casual word of appreciation to the one to have the other in a fit of sulks for days. She was afraid of the possible outcome of such a state of affairs, for she did not want to lose either of them. They were both looking for promotion, and it wasn't easy for Mary to steer a steady course. So when Edward, his conscience pricking, suggested she should take more time off for herself, she would only refuse without giving a reason, and this seemed to create a distant feeling between them.

What she was really thinking he could not guess, and it seemed as though their thoughts no longer ran on the same lines. Their comradeship, their identity of interest, no longer seemed to exist. It had faded imperceptibly away, and he had not noticed its decline. It was gone, but he could not account for its passing, and had no time to worry about why or how.

His office door opened and a face came round, attached to a heavy cavalry moustache.

"Still at it?" said Captain Phillips. "Beats me what you find to do in there, Shrewsbury old man. Secret orgies, as like as not. Ha-ha."

"Is there anything I can do for you, Captain Phillips?"

Edward had already decided that the Phillipses must go. It would be possible to say that their room was required from the first of next month. He was a bore and she a snob, talking incessantly of their brilliant social life in India.

"Well, yes, Shrewsbury. You might give Miss Halkitt a graceful hint that we don't *all* want to listen to educational talks on the wireless."

"That will be all right, Captain Phillips. Miss Halkitt is having her own wireless installed in her room in a few days."

"Good man. All organised in advance, what?"

It was part of the daily routine. Tact, tact, and again tact.

8

The notice of a travel agency had caught his eye and his imagination, and though at first he had dismissed the matter from his mind, it kept returning to him. Switzerland. A cheap ten days' holiday.

Suddenly the idea caught him. He longed to go to Switzerland. It could be called a business trip, for everyone knew the Swiss were matchless hoteliers. He wrote off for details, and received a coloured folder with a beautiful Alpine scene upon it. Of course it was out of the question, and yet—— He placed the folder upon his desk and occasionally gave it a wistful inspection when he was alone. He went about his work dreaming of Switzerland. Ten days? Why not? Why must he give up the thought of something that appealed to him so much? He could afford it; surely he could be spared for this brief and satisfying pleasure.

It was Mr Buchanan who gave the matter publicity. When he came in to pay his weekly bill he noticed the folder and said, "The Jungfrau. That brings back lovely memories. Who's going to Switzerland?"

"Nobody that I know of." Edward gave the picture a tender look. "I sent for the folder. It advertises a ten days' holiday, with Interlaken as the centre. Inexpensive, too. I've got a desire to go, but it doesn't seem possible."

"Why ever not? Why don't you go, if you want to? Everybody ought to go to Switzerland; it's an incomparable country."

Edward smiled ironically.

"And who does my job while I'm away?"

Buchanan looked amazed.

"Why, Shrewsbury, this place runs like clockwork!"

"I'm glad you think so. That's how it's supposed to look, but I do a bit of work behind the scenes, you know."

"Of course. I realise that. But surely, for ten days—I mean, I promise that we guests would all be as helpful as possible; and don't tell me Miss Vincent couldn't manage."

"I daresay she could, but—oh no, I'll have to give up the idea."

At dinner that night Mrs Buchanan said, "You are going to Switzerland, aren't you, Mr Shrewsbury?"

"Now whatever gave you that idea?" he asked.

"My husband says you want so much to go, and it's so beautiful there. A short holiday would do you good, and the hotel no harm, I'm sure. We shall still be here when you come back"—she gave a short laugh—"though, alas, we shan't be here much longer. Our house will be ready for us in a month, and it will simply break our hearts to say good-bye."

Everybody in the dining-room had heard this exchange of remarks, including the waitress, and he knew that it would soon be all over the hotel. He felt uneasy about its penetrating by way of

kitchen gossip to Mary, so after dinner he sent Beryl downstairs to ask her to come to him in the office.

"Do sit down, Mary," he said. "There's a ridiculous story going round and I thought I'd——"

Her smile flashed.

"If you mean, the news that you're going to Switzerland for a holiday, Beryl couldn't wait to tell me. But why ridiculous?"

"Well, isn't it ridiculous? I admit I sent for a travel agent's folder, but the whole idea was a pipe-dream. Then Buchanan had to come into the office and see the folder and ask me if and why—and why not! There was nothing in it at all, but *Mrs Buchanan* then came out with certain remarks at table. I didn't want you to——"

"But, Eddie——" Her eyes widened. "If you want to go to Switzerland, why not? Why ever not? Do you want to go?"

"I'd love to go, but——"

"How long for?"

"It's an inexpensive excursion. Ten days. I——"

"Then of course you must go. We'll be perfectly all right here. You know that."

"Oh, but——"

"Don't 'but'! Don't be a fool, Eddie. Go, and enjoy yourself. When is it to be?"

"It leaves London every Friday. I could go next Friday. What about you? Can you really manage, or is it asking too much of you, with all your other work?"

She gave a confident laugh. "Me? I can manage anything, even the Croomie Hotel. Eddie, I want you to have this treat, and I'll never be happy if you don't. Alison can take over most of the cooking, she's quite capable, and I'll sit at your desk there and do the sums. Do say you'll go—if only to please me."

Delight flooded him. "All right, I'll go."

When finally he looked out of his hotel window at Interlaken he knew he had done right to come. At whatever inconvenience, he would have been wrong to miss this experience. There before him, like a mountain of the faery world, stood the Jungfrau, bathed in her rosy afterglow, her white crown touched with gold, and the violet sky beyond. He stepped out on to the small balcony and feasted his eyes on a dream materialised. The very air was magic air; ichor, the wine of gods.

I need go no further than this, he thought. There is no more beauty to see. I can look at this sight at dawn, at noon, and at night. I can think here.

He would not let himself be tied by the party's excursions, but wandered about alone, often sitting for hours in one place, in ecstasy. By day the sun, by night the moon on those superb heights. All the previous happenings of his life seemed now to be resolved in this fulfilment; the strife of life, the painful, stumbling ways he had

trodden had at last led him to this. He was exalted. He felt that his spirit would never again be earth-bound.

His only anxiety was that the days were passing and that he might not extract from each one its full value of hours. He was up very early every morning, eating his crisp rolls and cherry jam, drinking his fine coffee on the balcony; then out all day to climb or wander with apparent aimlessness in a land where even aimless wandering is highly rewarding. The nights were so beautiful that he hated to go in; he was always on his balcony to see the sun go down, to see the last light fade on Jungfrau's mighty snows, to wait breathlessly for the white moonlight, darkening the blue shadows to indigo on the mountain's breast, flooding the world with silent glory. He worshipped the mountain and knew sublime peace.

London seemed far away, as if it was unreal and did not exist; he gave it no thought. Then there were three days left; two; only one. He knew it was time to force upon himself the process of coming back to earth. He summed up his position. He must leave this lovely place, he must return to his own *milieu*. But what had he to complain of? He had everything. He had made a successful life for himself; he had achieved a great deal. He was, at forty-eight, a completely adjusted and contented man.

For the first time he let his thoughts run back to young Eddie Boan. The hard years. The disappointments. The battles and the defeats. All were over, and so small and unimportant in retrospect that he could not understand how once he had let them weigh him down. This much had the mountain done for him, had made him see his life in proportion. What mattered was to achieve a position for one's self in one's middle years, when there was still much of life to be enjoyed. The struggles hardly counted, only in so much as they were stepping-stones to a high and secure place.

I've got there! he thought.

And now, with the sun on his face, he could look around him, and ahead. There was a future for him, in which to enjoy the fruits of his labours. And Switzerland would still be here. He would come again! His happiness was so great that he could hardly contain it. How right to have come; to have obeyed the heaven-sent impulse that directed him here!

But now he must be practical. Tomorrow he was coming down from the heights and going home. Back to his hotel, his work, his guests. The prospect didn't seem so bad; he would have a great deal to tell, though the secret joy could never be revealed. He was so much better for his holiday, he was a greater man.

For the first time, he went into the town and strolled along the shops. They were so charming that he wished he had left a little more time to explore them. Beautiful embroideries, carvings, pottery; all set out to tempt the visitor. Thinking of his return, he decided that he had better take Mary a present. She had been

working, doing his job, while he revelled in luxurious leisure. He had so little idea what to take for her that the morning was gone before he knew it, and he began to be alarmed.

Just then he met two women members of the party, eagerly doing their last-minute shopping. They were surprised when he approached them, for they had all put him down as a recluse, a solitary-minded person who obviously wanted to be left alone. But they were ready to be helpful.

"A present for a lady? Oh, a blouse, of course. Every woman wants a Swiss blouse. We have each bought three. What size is the lady?"

He looked baffled. "Size? Rather plump—say——"

"Like me?" asked the plumper of the two.

"I should say that would be right."

"Come with us into this shop, it has the best selection——"

He had a bright idea. "Won't you go in and choose the blouse? I can leave it entirely to you. Then I can go off and have a last walk."

They agreed to this, though they thought it strange he should wish to have no say in the choice.

"The price?"

"Oh, that's all right. Just what you would buy for yourselves."

They handed him the parcel at dinner-time, and he put it into his suitcase unopened. It was a duty done without any great effort. For himself he had bought a painting of the town with the mountain in the background. It was an exquisite thing, and would hang in his room where he could look at it every morning when he woke, and dream of the day when he should see the reality again.

He arrived back in London in the early evening, and reached the hotel just as the guests were going in to dinner.

They gave him a cordial welcome.

"Hullo, Mr Shrewsbury. You're back? One has only to look at your face to see that you've had a wonderful time."

"Has everything been all right?"

"If it wouldn't be rude and misleading to say so, one might observe that we hardly noticed you weren't here."

He laughed with relief.

"Well, I'm back, and longing to get down to work." He gave the dining-room a proprietary glance and saw that the arrangements were perfect; the dinner smelt delicious. All was well.

Mary came up to give him a brief greeting in the interval while Beryl took the coffee into the lounge.

"Hullo, Eddie. It's good to see you back; and my stars! what a tan you've got! Did it come up to expectations?"

"It was the most sublime place. I've had a wonderful time. I'll show you some pictures later. Oh, and I've brought you a little present. Wait, I think I can get at it now—it's at the top of my case."

He handed her the parcel.

"It's a Swiss blouse. I was told authoritatively that every woman ought to have one."

"For *me*! Eddie, how sweet of you! How gorgeous!" She had ripped off the tissue paper already, and was examining the exquisite embroidery. "I'm so touched that you should have thought of me."

"That's nothing. Well, I'd better dive into the office and see what's piled up for me."

She at once became business-like. "I think you'll find everything accounted for up to date. It's all in order, and there's no question of piling-up, I'm glad to say. I found it possible to get up a bit earlier in the morning and tackle the office work. There are one or two letters for you to answer; you'll see them on the desk."

"Has everything been all right below stairs?"

"All under control. The kitchenmaid has gone, I'm afraid, but I've got a new one coming in tomorrow."

"Oh? What was the matter? I thought she was good."

"She didn't get on with Alison. It's all right, I sorted it out. There's nothing for you to bother about. You get along and unpack, and I'll send your dinner up to you. Don't try and cope with anything tonight. You must be fed up at having to come back."

"I don't know about that. It's rather pleasant to be back."

He suddenly realised after he had gone upstairs that he had not thanked her for all she had done in his absence, and for making it possible for him to go; but of course she did not expect thanks, not Mary.

The next day was a busy one, taking up the threads of his work, finding how much could happen in less than a fortnight. It did occur to him in the evening to wonder why Mary had not put on the blouse. He had insisted on her taking the evening off to go and see one of her old friends, and he was slightly disappointed when he saw that she was wearing one of her old blouses. Man-like, having done a rare thing in presenting a gift, he was impatient to see it in use, a form of self-flattery.

He was still in the office when she returned and came to tell him she was in.

"You didn't put on the blouse," he said. "Didn't you like it?"

"Like it! I adored it, but—well, it's quite a lot too big. Never mind; when I've time I'll try to take it in."

Too big. He felt guilty that he had not taken the trouble to select the blouse himself, when he could have better judged the size. And now he came to notice it, he saw with a shock that Mary had lost a great deal of weight. He simply had not observed it until now.

He said, almost reproachfully, "You've been over-working and losing weight. That's what it is. You'd better look after yourself, and grow to the blouse."

She gave her rich laugh.

"Don't be silly. Work isn't work when you enjoy it and do it for love of it. It's fun."

"You did like the blouse?"

"It's the nicest thing I ever had, and I'm nearly afraid to wear it. I'll frame it instead. Good night, Eddie. I'm just going down to make myself a cup of tea. Want one?"

"I wouldn't mind one."

"I'll bring you one up."

It did not enter his mind that once he would have gone down with her to the kitchen. Would even have made the tea himself, and taken her a cup.

He went back to his books and saw with regret that the Buchanans were due to leave the following week. They were pleasant people, and he would be very sorry to see them go, but their house in Scotland was ready for them, and for weeks Mrs Buchanan had been saying how she would dread the task of taking up housekeeping again, especially on a large scale.

He made a note to have flowers sent to greet Mrs Buchanan on her arrival at her home.

Mary slipped in with his tea.

"There. Leave the cup when you've done. I'm going to bed. Good night—for the second time."

"I see the Buchanans are going."

"Yes, isn't it a pity? We shall miss them."

"Good night, Mary. Thanks for the tea."

The next afternoon was warm and sunny. Most of the guests were out, but Miss Halkitt the retired schoolmistress was sitting in the paved garden writing letters.

Edward carried out her tea tray himself.

"Tea, Miss Halkitt?"

"Oh. Oh, how very sweet of you, Mr Shrewsbury. Tea in the garden, such a treat. I believe you had a wonderful holiday?"

"Delightful."

"Dear Interlaken. I haven't been there since I was a girl. And now tell me, whatever are we going to do without our Miss Vincent?"

"Miss Vincent?"

"I mean, when she goes off with Mrs Buchanan to Scotland. Shan't I miss her! And I'm sure you will."

He felt quite dazed.

"I don't—I mean——"

"Oh dear," said Miss Halkitt. "Have I put my foot in it?"

"Not at all. Just exactly what are you referring to?"

Miss Halkitt looked worried.

"I mean, about Mrs Buchanan having persuaded Miss Vincent to go to Scotland as her housekeeper, or rather more of a companion. Mrs Buchanan told me herself. You know how fond she is of Miss Vincent. I say, you're sure I'm not speaking out of turn? You did *know*, didn't you?"

He felt quite sick. Icy cold and sick, and yet burning with anger.

"Oh yes, I knew. At least, I didn't know it was settled."

"Well, so long as you knew. I should have felt so awful if I'd spoken when I shouldn't. You're sure?"

"Of course."

"That's all right, then. I would have worried so. But I made sure that you knew. I haven't said anything I shouldn't, have I? You looked for a minute as if you——"

"Not at all. It's quite all right."

He went straight up to his room and locked the door. He had taken a most appalling blow, and was helpless under the assaults of varied emotions. Loss, humiliation, jealousy, rage. While he was quite unsuspecting, all this had been going on behind his back. If he had had any common sense at all he might have foreseen it, with all Mrs Buchanan's talk about her dread of engaging new staff and her rather over-sentimental attachment to Mary.

But in his wildest dreams he had never envisaged such a thing as her stealing Mary, much less Mary's being willing to be stolen. He had been completely blind and trusting, and still he could not believe that this awful thing was happening to him. All the time he was in Switzerland, secure in his new-found happiness and contentment, this had been going on at home. Plotting against him. Contriving deceit.

He was so angry that he shook all over, and as his thoughts clarified it was Mary against whom his rage was directed. After all, one could hardly blame Mrs Buchanan for looking after her own interests, even though it was not quite the done thing to try to lure away hotel staff. But Mary! He would have sworn that he could trust her utterly; that she would never let him down. Only last night she had talked calmly about the Buchanans leaving, while she knew——! So no one was to be trusted, no one in the world. Mary was sick of the hotel, sick of him, out to grasp at the chance of a more congenial job. Then why the hell hadn't she had the decency to come and tell him so? It would have been a stab to the heart, but an honest one.

And now the let-down to end all let-downs!

As the situation unfolded itself further before his anguished eyes he thought, what on earth was he going to do at the hotel without Mary? She was indispensable. She did about fifty per cent of the work.

And then there was the personal aspect, the intolerable mortification of knowing that Mary preferred the Buchanans to himself.

It was time for him to dress for dinner. He went down to supervise the final arrangements and check the menus. It was the waitress's night off, and he had to do the waiting himself; it was a good thing, for it gave him an excuse not to linger at the tables and chat.

The coffee came up in the lift at last, and he carried it into the lounge and served it. As he went back to the hall he caught Loretta, the chambermaid, going up to turn down the beds.

"Will you tell Miss Vincent I want to see her at once in the office."

He went into the office and waited for Mary. He felt quite ill, as though he were choking for breath.

She came in hot and weary from the stove, her hair dishevelled.

"I know," she said. "You don't need to tell me. The steak was overdone. But——"

"What's this about you going off with the Buchanans?" he said.

He saw her mouth twitch; her eyes gleam and harden as they looked into his and noted that his were like steel, with glints of fire in the pupils.

"Will you tell me, Eddie, what you are talking about? What have you heard?"

"Miss Halkitt told me this afternoon that you were going to Scotland with Mrs Buchanan, to be her housekeeper."

"It isn't true," she said calmly. "What made you think it was?"

The shock of relief made him gasp. Surprised at his violent reaction she went on, "I think there's been a bit of wishful thinking. Before you went away Mrs Buchanan asked me to go with her; of course I refused. I didn't tell you because I didn't want to bother you with such a trivial matter. She annoyed me by pressing me, by offering me all kinds of inducements. I suppose she must have so taken it for granted that she would wear me down that she went so far as to tell Miss Halkitt that it was a fact. She'd no business to do so."

"There's no truth in it?"

"Not a shred. It's absurd."

She paused, and said, "You believed that I would do a thing like that."

He thought it was a question, but in a moment saw that it was an accusation.

"I had plenty of grounds for believing it."

"You had no grounds at all. What must have been going on in your mind against me since you heard this lie?"

"I was terribly upset, Mary."

"You had no right to be upset. You had no right to *believe* a thing like that about me."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sure you are, but the fact remains that you didn't have any faith in me."

He stared at her.

"Of course I had faith in you. I'd had such complete faith in you that I was shattered."

She tried to laugh, but she was trembling.

"The same sort of faith that Othello had in that poor little Desdemona. If it had been the other way round I'd have told the Halkitt what to do with her beastly lie."

At first he had thought she looked a little ludicrous, flushed and untidy from the kitchen, with a loose tail of hair straying across her cheek like a comic stage charwoman; but now in her real distress she seemed majestic.

"I'm very sorry, Mary."

"So am I," she said. "And I'm rocking on my foundations; I don't know where I stand now. It isn't the same."

He looked at her anxiously, rather apprehensive about some suspected implication in her tone.

"I'm going up to bed," she said. "I'm rather tired tonight. Good night."

She went out and closed the door quietly.

He wanted to go after her, to pick some shred of gratification out of the rags of their talk, but dare not. It was all very unsatisfactory; he felt as though she had left him somewhere midway between relief and anxiety.

He told himself that she would be all right tomorrow, but wasn't sure if he could believe it. Why had she made such an issue of his faith or lack of faith in her?

Puzzled and shaken, he went through the business of the evening. A party of six had gone to the theatre, and he waited up for them. It was past midnight when he locked up and went to bed, feeling unaccountably tired. Emotion, he thought, took it out of you. Best to forget today's silly little episode—for it was a silly little episode and would fall into proportion by tomorrow.

If he expected to sleep he was disappointed. Mary's face; Mary's eyes. They would not leave him.

He lay on his back with his hands clasped behind his head, and so lying fell into an uneasy sleep, only to awake shivering with cold in the chill hour between two and three.

Woke to realisation. With awful clarity he saw himself as he was. Just as Isobel had used and betrayed him long ago, so had he used and betrayed Mary Vincent. As Isobel had let him down, so had he let Mary down. Isobel's thoughtlessness and cruelty had been reproduced in himself; had been vented upon the person least deserving of it. The devoted person. The selfless, giving person. As he had served and honoured Isobel, so had Mary served and honoured him. She had never considered herself; and he had never considered her.

The revelation was so awful that he could not lie any longer, but got up and paced the room. Small incidents and instances came to his mind to torment him. In their life in the hotel she had always had the rough end of the stick and he the smooth, and because she never complained, he had been fool enough to kid himself that she liked it that way. To delude himself! To butter his conscience and flatter his conceit.

She had toiled and received no recognition from him, and little

consideration. Good God! What must she have suffered this past twenty months or more while he built up his egoism and self-esteem?

He saw himself standing on a shining mountain in Switzerland congratulating himself upon his own achievements, while everything he had and was he owed to her. Without her, by now he would not have existed. That, at last, was the plain truth, and he acknowledged it.

Soon after daylight came he heard a noise; the sound of her door softly opening and then closing.

Instantly his thoughts leapt ahead in panic.

Supposing she were gone? Off for good. Women who were badly hurt—and after last night she must feel she had reached the end—were apt to do such things, such drastic things.

He wanted to rush after her, but could not. He felt as though he were chained. He deserved that she should walk out of his life, but when she was gone whatever should he do? He put his hand up to his temple and found it cold and wet.

In the next hour his mind ran through a score of desperate expedients. To get her back? . . . To convince her that he was sincere? . . . To secure her to him for the future? The first and last would be the hardest; feeling as abjectly contrite as he did his sincerity must be obvious. If he could only persuade her to listen to him! But how to find her, win her back, keep her? Without her he would be lost. Finished. He and the hotel.

The new kitchenmaid, receiving no answer to her tap, came in with his tea. She was surprised to see him up and dressed.

He said sharply, "Have you seen Miss Vincent?"

"Oh yes, sir. She got up early, to show me how to do out the store cupboard."

"She's there now?"

She stared, at his sharp tone. And nodded, speechless.

Relief overwhelmed him and made him feel weak. He waved the girl aside and, ignoring the tea, went down to the basement.

"Mary!"

"Yes?" She looked up, surprised to see him at that hour.

He went in and closed the door. For a moment he could not speak; the tense silence lasted long enough to startle her.

"Mary," he said. "You must marry me. I ought to have asked you long ago."

The colour quite left her face. She snatched up a duster and wrung it in her fingers. Her eyes scanned him over. She said with more sadness than bitterness, "That's as good a way of making sure of me as any."

"I deserved that," he said, humbly realising how well she knew him and could read his mind. "But I mean it, Mary, with all my heart. It came to me in the night, how unspeakably badly I've

treated you. I've been full of myself; I've let you down. It's like the past over again—my past. All that Isobel did to me I've done to you. I'm bitterly sorry. I daren't ask you to forgive me."

"I'll forgive you," she said quietly. "But it needn't go as—as far as you said. It's all right, Eddie, I understand. And I won't leave you."

His fingers worked in his clenched palms.

"I don't know what to say. I want you to marry me, Mary. I want it more than I ever wanted anything in my life. I want us to make a new start together—to get back to—our nearness——"

She looked down at her hands, still gripping the duster.

"We can get back to our friendship without any drastic measures. I'm not going to marry you; it's out of the question. Don't worry any more. It'll be all right from now on."

"But, don't you see? I want to make it up to you. I'll do anything—anything——"

"I'm sure you will." She put out one hand and rested it on his arm. "It's all over. Let's start afresh, with trust on both sides."

"You really are my star."

She gave a quick nod. "And you're mine. Understood?"

"Mary——"

"No. Don't say any more."

"I must say more. I've done you no good. In all this time, no good at all."

"I'm the best judge of that."

"Ah, but I know——"

Suddenly they heard the quick pattering footsteps of the kitchen-maid. In a moment she would be tapping at the door.

So it was to be left at that. If Mary was satisfied, he wasn't.

He went back to his room in a mood of complete self-abnegation. One thing he knew. That she didn't really need him.

That she would be better off without him.

9

Among the guests was a retired solicitor named Mannion.

Edward said to him, "Can you recommend me a good solicitor?"

"You have none of your own?"

"This is for a particular matter. Very private."

"I can give you the address of a good man."

He made an appointment and went down to the City the following afternoon. The solicitor looked grave and reliable, the kind of man to inspire confidence.

"Mr Shrewsbury? What can I do for you?"

"I want to dispose of all my property. I think you call it a deed of gift. To a friend."

"All your property? You mean——"

"Just what I say. There's a hotel—assets at the bank. Every-

thing. I want the business all finished and tied up without this other person knowing about it. Can it be done?"

"Perhaps you'll tell me a few details."

"All you want to know. But the—my friend must not be brought into it until everything is settled. That is important. And I want it all done quickly. . . ."

Back at home in his room he took a sheet of letter paper and began to write.

"My dear Mary,

"My coming into your life was an intrusion. You accepted this blundering and benighted intrusion with a kindness and grace which can never have been equalled. Not once since have you let me see how great was the weight you carried, the weight of my very existence. All this I laid on you and let you bear. Quite suddenly I came to a realisation of what this means. Everything I have I owe to you, and therefore everything I have is yours. If I am a man I must now stand alone and make use of the spiritual gift you bestowed on me. That should be enough. So no more of this one-sided partnership, with me getting the obvious rewards and you, who deserve the best, getting only the toil.

"In a day or two you will be receiving a letter from a firm of solicitors in Cheapside. It will tell you that I have made over the hotel and all its assets to you, by deed of gift. They are yours now, and yours alone. I think you'll carry on here and make a big success, it's more your *forte* than the theatre.

"Don't feel embarrassed at having to explain my absence. Hotel guests are quite nonchalant about the comings and goings of the management. Let it be known that *you* are the owner—and let them think what they damned well like. If expedient, allow them to think that I wasn't all I cracked myself up to be. That's true enough.

"So get to it, Mary, and be happy as I know you can. You were made for smiles, warmth, generosity. If I failed you, remember that it was because I hadn't got the capacity to give on your scale. Don't worry about me, I'll make out. I'll never forget you, Mary.

"God bless you,

"Eddie."

He read the letter over doubtfully; it sounded stilted and said nothing that he had meant to say. It would have to do.

He put it into an envelope and addressed it; and left it propped up on the table beside his bed.

He packed a bag with a few necessities, found that he had twelve pounds in his wallet; and a few minutes later left the house unseen and walked quickly to the nearest bus stop.

He had no idea where he was making for, except that he wanted to get out of London. He went to Paddington and took a train; with his bag on the rack above him he reviewed his position.

He would find a country town and get work. With his capabilities if he couldn't get work it was a reflection on him. This wasn't by any means the first time he had started all over again with nothing but his hands and his brain. Something would come of it; some sort of new life.

He chose a rural county town, and put up for one night at a modest hotel. The next morning he asked the way to the local registry.

The woman who ran it also did a side-line in baby-wear, and interviewed him in the shop which appeared to interest her a great deal more than finding situations for the unemployed.

"Butler?" she said. "Nothing doing at all, I'm afraid. It's the new poor, you know. No butlers. What else can you do?"

"If I said footman," he said, "it would probably be worse than ever."

"You've said it." She added, "Excuse me——" and went off to serve a customer with bootees.

Returning she said, "You'd be no good as houseman—general domestic work, you know. You're too old."

He winced; it was a nasty cut, though she had not meant it as such. She was stating an obvious fact, but its implication was a severe blow to his self-confidence. He had always thought of himself as a young man.

"The good-class places want women," she said. "Working house-keepers who can look after kids and do a bit of gardening and drive the car if needs be. What about chauffeur?"

"No good."

"Gardening?"

"No."

"What about your refs.?"

"My—what?"

"Testimonials. Recent ones."

"I'm afraid I haven't any recent ones. I've had my own hotel." She shrugged her shoulders.

"Difficult. Sorry. I've had good-class people in here before wanting jobs, but they can't do much really. Not the sort of work that's in demand. If I were you I'd get along the road and ask at some of the wayside hotels. They're often wanting some sort of help, and they're not so fussy about asking questions."

"Thank you."

"Pity," she said. "Good-looking chap like you. We never know when we'll come down in the world, do we? If you like to leave me your address and I hear of anything I'll let you know, but I don't hold out much hope."

"Is there anywhere else in the town I could ask?"

"Pardon me——" She hastily sorted the contents of a drawer of babies' vests and closed it. "There's Mrs Harvey's, but I wouldn't

advise it in your case. She's very strong on refs., and she couldn't do any better for you than me. If I was you I'd go to London; there's always something in London."

"Thank you. Good morning."

He went back to the hotel where he had stayed and asked the manager if he knew of any job going in the local hotel business.

The manager, a seedy fellow, looked surprised, for he had put this guest down as a gent.

"What sort of a job?"

"I can do most things in the hotel business."

The manager shook his head

"You're not quite the sort. If it's a waiter's job, they want 'em young and nippy. Were you thinking of the bar? Are you a member of the U.K.B.G.?"

"No, no, I'm not a barman."

"Nothing doing, then, I'm afraid "

He packed his bag and left, walking along the main road. After about two miles he came to a roadside hotel which seemed to be doing a lot of business. There were several cars in the car park, and a man who looked like the proprietor was at the door slipping a leash on a bull terrier.

"Good morning."

"Good morning, sir. Nice day." The owner scented custom.

Edward said, "I'm looking for a job. Are you wanting anyone?"

The man's manner changed. He was broad, thick-necked, wearing horsey tweeds.

"What can you do?"

"Most things in a hotel."

"Got a character?"

"I hope so! But not a written one. I had my own hotel."

"Oh." The man frowned, evidently disliking the pleasantries.

"Nothing fishy?"

"I assure you there isn't "

"I see. Just a failure, eh?"

Edward felt the muscles harden in his cheeks and fought to control his anger.

"I was once in good service."

"As it happens," the man said, "I want a porter. Now. My chap left this morning. You can have a try if you like, but I warn you there'll be no larking about. I'll have my eye on you."

"I can start at once, if you like."

"Right. I'll give you a sacking apron and a bucket and you can wash the front windows for a start."

"All right."

"And wages. You can't expect much, not at first, without a character, and perhaps being no good at all. Fifteen bob a week and your tips. You'll have to sleep rough over the garage."

"All right."

"When you've washed the windows you can clean my car—the green Rover there—and then tidy yourself up. I'm expecting a couple arriving at four. You'll take up their luggage. The maid'll show you the way. Don't expect me to tell you everything."

"All right."

"And you'll call me 'sir'. Or I'll give you 'all right'."

He found a hook in a passage at the back on which he hung his coat. He put on the sacking apron and began on the windows. He found himself working with nervous haste, sweating and fumbling at the unaccustomed task, anxious to make good. He didn't remember ever having cleaned a car, but did the best he could, worrying over the smears, continually going for fresh water.

"You'll have to be quicker than that," said the proprietor, strolling over to inspect. "There's a lot to do in a day in this job. I've no use for slow-coaches."

The only place for him to wash apparently was at a tap in the back yard. He tried to get the grime out of his nails, and then combed his hair.

A woman came out of the back door and said, "You the new porter?"

"Yes."

"Here's your coat." She held out a greasy grey alpaca garment.

"I'd rather wear my own."

"Huh. Grand, are you? Well, get into this one. Who do you think you are?"

He put on the grey alpaca, and went through into the front hall. A car was just drawing up at the door and a man and woman got out. The hotel, being on the main road, did a lot of one-night trade.

The couple were young and wore expensive sports clothes; the woman had a short leopard-skin coat slung over her shoulders.

"Get the luggage off," said the proprietor to Edward.

The owner of the car helped. There were two pigskin cases, a dressing-case, odd coats.

"Number five," said the proprietor, jerking his head at Edward.

He took a suitcase in either hand, put the coats over his shoulder, and the dressing-case under his arm. He had no idea where the room was, but at the top of the stairs a maid directed him. The guests followed him.

When he got downstairs the proprietor said, "Did he give you a tip?"

"Two shillings."

"Right. You give me one. Go and sweep out the bar now, and then get down to the kitchen and see if you can give a hand. Make yourself useful—or else——"

The woman who had spoken to him in the yard was the cook. When she had prepared the dinner he swept out the kitchen for her

and cleaned down the gas-cooker. Apparently kitchen-porter and hall-porter were one in this place. When he had finished she told him he could have his dinner, and gave him a covered plate of half-cold food from the cooling oven.

He ate some of it, standing, and gave the remainder to a thin cat that prowled around.

"What do I do now?"

"Draw all the curtains and make up the fires. Fill the scuttles in here and in the boss's room. Then clean yourself up and go and see what Alf wants you to do."

"Who's Alf?"

"The barman. He'll give you something to do. Then you get the late coffees, and fetch any shoes down to clean, and lock up. Alf'll show you how, for once."

At one a.m. he found his way to the loft over the garage where there was a straw palliasse for him, covered with two grey blankets.

It was not possible to sleep. He was used to hard work, but not to drudgery. I shan't get rich here, he thought, with a grim attempt at humour; not with fifteen bob a week and Cobham taking half my tips.

Sometime much later he lost consciousness and was awakened by a girl's voice shouting, "Hey there! It's six o'clock." The shout came up the loft ladder and was apparently meant for him.

Achingly he dressed and went down. The shouter was a blowsy maid shaking dusters at the back door. She appeared to have neither washed nor combed her hair for a long time.

"When can I wash and shave?" Edward asked.

"After breakfast. I'll get you a bowl of hot water—if you're lucky."

"Any chance of a cup of tea now?"

"You've got a hope! Our breakfast's ha'-past seven."

"Couldn't you boil a kettle?" he ventured.

"And what do we use for tea? Everything's locked up—even the cat's milk. You'd better get on with your hall and steps, never mind wanting what you ain't likely to get."

It seemed to Edward a quite revolting thing to have to sit down to breakfast after an hour's dirty work unwashed and unshaved. This, then, was how people came down in the world. Force a man to look dirty, and he began to feel degraded. Degradation eventually became second nature to him. His spirit was broken, his self-respect gone. How long before the final stage was reached was a matter for disagreeable conjecture.

Unprofitable thoughts, these, for a porter. But a porter wasn't supposed to think. The sooner he learned not to think the more comfortable for him. There were some situations which thinking made quite intolerable.

Breakfast over, he reminded the maid of her promise of hot water,

and grudgingly she gave him a tin bowl containing about half a pint. It was too much trouble to refill the kettle.

He carried it to his loft, but there was no mirror, and he had to make do with the tiny one he carried in his pocket. Not very satisfactory. And almost before he had finished she was shouting to him to come down; Mr Cobham wanted the gravel drive raked over.

The woman who worked in the stillroom was off for the day, so he had to give a hand with the washing-up. Stone passages to sweep. A floor to scrub. Windows to polish. A wardrobe to dismantle and bring down from number 2, and load on to a lorry. An extra bed to take up from the shed in the yard and erect in number 8. And he was continually being shouted for, so that he had to keep breaking off what he was doing and rush down—or up—to the hall, and sleek his hair back, and wipe his hands on his trousers and take somebody's luggage to their room, or bring somebody else's luggage down.

Run. Rush. Pull. Push. Carry. Lift. Haul. Sweep. Scrub. Polish. When he thought he was doing his best the cook gave him a sarcastic look and said, "Don't kill yourself!"

He said, "I'm doing my best."

"What's a man's best, anyway? It's the women who do the work."

And then the porter's bell rang, and he rushed to the hall.

"Porter! Porter! Oh, porter, I've left my attaché case in my room. If it isn't beside the bed it's on top of the wardrobe. Fetch it."

"Yes, sir."

"Porter, can you get me a railway time-table?"

"Yes, sir."

"Porter, how do the buses run?"

"Sorry, sir. I've only just come myself."

"Find out for me, will you?"

"Yes, sir."

Luggage up. Luggage down. After lunch the washing-up, for the dining-room had been full. He washed the stillroom floor and cleaned the sink.

The cook shouted, "Oi. You! The scullery sink's stopped up. You'll have to open the trap."

"Mr Cobham said when I'd finished this——"

"Never mind what Mr Cobham said. You can see to it when you've got my sink unstopped."

"I'm coming."

He rinsed his hands, but could find only a sliver of soap; nothing that would get the filth off them. There was a rag of towel hanging over the tap; one day when he could get to a shop he'd buy himself a towel.

The cook looked in. "Don't you let the boss catch you wiping your hands on the stillroom towel. And when are you going to do my job? Dallying about!"

At the close of that day Edward estimated that he had worked

sixteen hours. It seemed to be a fair average of what he might expect. All his meals had been interrupted by the porter's bell.

He had taken seven shillings in tips and considered he had earned them, for apart from sixpences for carrying luggage up and down stairs, he had spent half an hour cording up a large wooden case for a visitor—this in the afternoon when, if he had been an older hand at the game, he could have claimed to be off duty—and had on request cleaned two pairs of mud-clotted boots for a couple of anglers. But he had had to turn over three-and-sixpence to Cobham, who seemed to have an instinct for knowing when money was about to change hands, and would appear from nowhere.

At midnight he threw himself on his palliasse to enjoy the only few hours that he could really call his own. And what was he pitying himself for? He was a hotel porter now. The country was full of small hotel porters, doing daily the sort of job he was doing and not making any song-and-dance about it. A porter's lot was not a happy one. So—what?

The hotel was quite a good one, as roadside hotels go, with an attractive frontage, comfortable appointments for the guests, and a reputation along the road for excellent food. At the end of his first week, lying on his palliasse on his 'afternoon off', which had begun at four p.m., Edward thought it was a living hell. He wasn't going to stand this sort of life for long. In a little while he would push on.

But to where?

The question brought him up short, with a cold knot of fear hardening in his stomach. Fear of what he was forced to admit to himself. He had hardly any money, and he had to live. He couldn't afford to be out of work, and where on earth did he think he was going to better himself?

A sense of doom came over him. It was a bad year, this 1929. There was an awful lot of unemployment. What chance did a man of getting on to fifty stand in the labour market when young men were out of work? And what qualifications had he beyond his two hands and a 1914 reference from a dead peer?

He was downright lucky to have got any job. Leaving it he might come to a much worse one—or none at all. He told himself bitterly that he was getting soft; that hundreds of men older than he were accepting similar drudgery as a normal way of life. It was useless to talk—or think—of getting away. There wasn't any hope; he'd be a fool to try. Perhaps after six months or so, if he saved all his wages—and those half-tips—he might be able to take a chance.

Meanwhile he must tolerate until they became second nature and failed to disgust him, the broken nails, the general griminess of his inadequately washed body, the perpetual ache in his limbs.

Loneliness, too, was a sad factor. A rumour had gone round the kitchen that he was a 'gentleman who had come down in the world', and this seemed to mark him out for suspicion. He was prepared to

be friendly, but no one seemed to want his friendliness. The other servants were coarse, yokel types; except for Bernard the waiter, who was a Londoner, slick and superior. A casual, companionable remark to Bernard had been met with a stony stare. Evidently Edward had made a serious *faux pas*; Bernard belonged to a much higher level in the hotel world. He found himself wondering if Bernard was expected to turn over half his tips, and thought it unlikely.

When after ten days he was grudgingly given a half-day off, he went on the bus to the country town and spent nearly an hour at the barber's. Then he went to a café and had a decent tea, decently served. It seemed to restore his self-respect a little, and was well worth the money he had spent. Yet still he had to admit that he couldn't afford such extravagance; the barber alone had cost him twelve-and-six. He must save his money, on the chance that someday he might get away.

Another one-and-sixpence went on the pictures. It was money wasted, for he could not concentrate on the films and felt sick at heart.

When he got back to the hotel, Cobham took one look at his spruced-up appearance and said, "What do you think you're doing? Leading a double life?"

The cook also made an ambiguous remark, and he felt that he was under suspicion. It evidently didn't do to suggest that the porter might have ideas above his station.

He had been at the hotel just over a fortnight when Cobham told him one morning to take the bull-terrier into the yard and wash it. This was no easy or pleasant job, for the brute had a nasty trick of catching his hand between its teeth, nipping it and breaking the skin. Also it struggled, and soaked him with water right through his apron and clothes.

He had barely finished when Cobham came into the yard.

"Haven't you done yet?"

"Just finished—sir."

"Well, tidy yourself up, quick, and take coffee for one to the coffee-room, and put a match to the fire while you're at it. Bernard's off duty."

He snatched up a towel in the scullery and mopped at his wet legs, which were already chilling him, for the day was cold. Then he put on his alpaca coat, and went to the stillroom, where he laid a tray while the cleaning-woman boiled up some coffee left over from breakfast.

"Biscuits?"

"I suppose so."

She put two Marie biscuits into the sauce, which was contrary to orders. Edward found a small plate for them and a paper doily.

"Fusspot!" she said with a snort.

He carried the tray to the coffee-room. A woman was standing by the unlit hearth with her back to the door.

"Coffee, madam?"

She turned. "Well, Eddie? And what do you think you're doing here?"

He put down the tray on the nearest table, for the floor seemed to be rising up to meet him.

"How did you get here, Mary?"

"You may well ask! Private detective. Cost me fifty pounds. Shocking, isn't it?"

He tried to hide his hands from her, to keep her eyes off his sodden, stained clothes. She gave him a long, slow, tender look.

"Eddie, I can't get on without you, and that's a fact. I'm like a camel without its hump. All dried up," she said, employing one of her robust images.

"That's not true. You shouldn't have tried to find me. I told you not to, and I knew what I was doing. I'm not going to say it all over again."

"What's it like here?" she asked directly.

"It's all right. Only the porter isn't supposed to stand chatting with the customers. The management doesn't approve of it."

"Then the management can take a running jump at itself."

"You shouldn't have come, Mary."

"Don't go into all that again. I'm here. I've found you at last. Don't tell me you like this job!"

"It's a job, isn't it? I'm all right."

"You're putting a good face on it, Eddie, and I don't doubt you'd get by in the end because you've got the guts to stick anything out; I know that. Only it's pointless now and it's unnecessary. You've showed me what you can do. Now let's call the whole thing off. Let's be sane about it. I appreciate what you did, and I understand. But I'm lost without you; I can't get on at all."

"That's not possible."

"Get your things, Eddie," she said. "We're leaving."

"No——"

Her confident manner fell from her suddenly. She trembled, her face quivered and she turned her head quickly away.

"Don't let me down," she said, struggling to speak before tears drowned her voice. "Don't, Eddie. I love you too much, my dear."

The one word hit him like a wave hits the defiant rock.

"What—what did you say?"

Sonia said that when bitterness goes out something else has to come in. Not pride and self-sufficiency. Love. And love came in on that mounting wave and overwhelmed him.

It was a miracle. The wonder swept over and all around him, with a piercing sweetness that was hardly bearable; he was caught up into a new and violent freedom of love.

He took two steps towards Mary; his arms were round her, he was holding her close and kissing her throat, her eyes and lips.

The fear, the misunderstanding, and all else that had really nothing to do with their lives seemed to melt away.

Chapter 8

I

*18 Linden Gardens,
Notting Hill Gate,
March 4th, 1951*

"General Erskine.

"Dear General,

"You used to tell me in the old days at the Croome that if ever I had need to call upon you to do so.

"That is my excuse for writing after such a long time, and I hope you will forgive me. A great deal has happened since I saw you and Mrs Erskine last, in '42. The war has ended and we are making a bit of headway towards recovery. I read about the honour you had received and was delighted.

"In spite of the war we had happy times at the Croome, and I shall never forget the kindness of yourself and Mrs Erskine, or how you kept our spirits high even in the darkest days. I hope you are both well and enjoying your retirement, but if you are still the same as when I knew you it won't be a complete retirement. You were like myself, miserable when you weren't working.

"A great deal happened after you left us, of which you may not have heard. We lost a large portion of our roof in '43, by blast, but consoled ourselves with the mistaken idea that lightning never strikes twice in the same place. The first warning was a blessing, for it made us vacate the hotel pending repairs. It never was repaired. It got a direct hit two months later, and that was the end of the dear old Croome.

"Mary and I could do nothing about it till the war was over, and we were lucky to get this flat. It is a top-floor flat, and with what was going on in London at the time nobody fancied it. Our faith in it was justified; it survived the bombing.

"Unfortunately we were never able to start again. My wife's health failed, and when the war ended she was in hospital. She died just a year ago, one day after our twenty-first wedding anniversary. They were twenty-one of the best years a man ever had, and the thankfulness for such a spell of happiness helped me to accept my loss without bitterness. I have been sustained by the kindness of many friends.

"Now I come to the point of my letter. I feel a great desire to get

back to work again. I know I am seventy-one years of age, but that is nothing in these days. I neither look it nor feel it. And what about Churchill?

"I should very much like to have a try at my old job as butler; just for a year or two, to satisfy this desire. One last fling, you might say, to make me feel that I'm not finished and laid aside.

"If you don't think this unreasonable, can you help me? Or is the English butler an anachronism? Please don't dismiss this idea, and say with a shrug, 'Poor old Shrewsbury. The beginning of senile folly.' I watch myself carefully for signs of softening of the brain, but they haven't appeared yet.

"If you know of anyone in your acquaintance who would give me a job after my own heart, would you be so kind as to let me know? But don't let it worry you. If it is impossible, tell me so.

"With every good wish,

"Yours sincerely,

"Edward Shrewsbury."

*Surrey Hotel,
Northumberland Avenue,
March 7th*

"My dear Shrewsbury,

"I was delighted to hear from you after all these years, though much of your news made me very sad. The time my wife and I spent at your nice hotel was outstandingly happy, and never to be forgotten.

"I am glad that your letter has been forwarded to me from home while I happen to be in London. Won't you come and see me at my hotel? Just give me a ring when you get this and we'll make an appointment. I think I can do something for you, and I do applaud your notion of refusing to lie down! My wife is here with me, and has something to add to what I shall tell you.

"Waiting to hear from you,

"Yours most cordially,

"Richard Erskine."

2

"Well, Shrewsbury!" The hands of the two elderly men met in a warm clasp. "I knew you'd come promptly. What will you take?" Edward's eyes went to the clock; General Erskine's twinkled.

"Three-forty? It sounds more like tea than sherry. We'll order some up. I'm glad to see you looking well. Thinner, but the same steadfast look. You've been through a great deal."

"Only what one must expect of life, I suppose. It gives—and takes away."

"If only we could learn to accept that truth! It's the right way,

the only way to prevent heart-break. I admire you for your courage, and I don't mind admitting that my eyes were full when I read what you wrote about Mary. She was a dear and lovely woman. And as for the Croome Hotel—well, it will always exist in memory, and that will last as long as we last. Rachel would like to send some flowers in remembrance of Mary; I hope you will allow her to do so."

"I should appreciate it very much."

"Rachel isn't back from the hairdresser's yet. Meanwhile, let's ring for our tea and talk over your project."

Mrs Erskine came in while the tea was being poured, and greeted Edward like an old friend.

"It certainly was time you wrote," she said, after she had spoken warmly and sympathetically of the past. "But I suppose your friends from the Croome must be numbered in scores. Richard and I were so happy that you called on us to help you. I hope we can. Have you got round to discussing it yet?"

"Hardly," said her husband. "We waited for you."

"I hope you don't think I'm crazy," said Edward. "I have too much time on my hands, and it occurred to me that I should like to do something useful again, something after my own heart, something that I can do well. Do you know anybody who wants a butler?"

They both laughed.

"Anybody who gets you will be lucky," Mrs Erskine said. "But they've got to be the right kind of people—your kind of people. And after two wars and all the taxation, old houses being turned into show-places and so on, there aren't many of them left in a position to employ you. Mind you, we know plenty of people who'd like to have you—if they didn't live in tiny flats with one faithful maid from the old days, and a daily woman."

Edward looked thoughtful, and General Erskine said, "Now don't depress him, Rachel."

"Nothing was further from my mind. I'm only stating the worst first. People who do have butlers seem to have the butler they always had, the one who has grown old along with the family. You told us that you knew Lady Thirlwood. I wondered——"

He nodded. "For reasons, I wouldn't want to appeal to her. She's always been a good friend to me, but—well, pride enters into it, and that's sheer foolishness, but I can't get rid of it."

"That's all right," said the General. "And now we'd better tell you without beating about the bush what we have in mind. I don't know how it will strike you. Have you ever thought of going to America?"

Edward looked surprised, and Mrs Erskine interrupted, "Of course he hasn't. Why spring it on him like that, Richard? So tactless of you. Now just lead up to it gently."

"If you say so. Rachel is an American, you know, and she has a

great many friends and relations in New York. They love English butlers in New York, or so she tells me——”

“Of course they do,” Mrs Erskine interrupted. “What we wondered was whether you would care to try a post there, Mr Shrewsbury? We could find you something, I know, with nice people. Not the English sort of people you’ve been accustomed to. You’d have to adjust yourself, but that would make it more exciting. And you’d love New York.”

“It’s a bit astonishing,” said Edward. “But it’s quite an idea.”

“You could stay just as long or as short a time as you wished. I think you’d enjoy it. I’m sure I could find you a position to start with, and you could move on when you’ve had a look round.”

“And there’s another side to it,” said General Erskine, “if we can fall so low as to discuss finance. They pay amazing salaries over there. You could earn something like two hundred dollars a month——”

“That’s nearly seventy pounds,” his wife interrupted.

“It would give you quite a tidy sum to add to your savings, if you stayed, say, a couple of years.”

Edward nodded.

“It isn’t the money alone, but I’m convinced. I’ll try it. It will be a new world for me. If I’m unsuitable they can only sling me out.”

“I can tell you now, there’s no fear of that.” Mrs Erskine laughed. “They’ll jump at you. They’ll adore you. I can’t wait to get my air-mail letter written. How soon could you go?”

A month later he was on the Atlantic.

3

He stayed with Mrs Byrne for two years. His post was almost too comfortable and he had so little to do that he was ashamed of himself. Often he contemplated leaving and taking a harder, more lively situation. He had plenty of opportunities, for Mrs Byrne’s own friends were not above trying to tempt him away with offers of large establishments on Long Island and even higher salaries. But when it came to analysing his reasons for not going, he found that the very will was lacking. The spring was gone, the spirit of youth that thirsts for change and exploration.

I can’t put it off any longer, he confessed to himself. I’ve got to admit it; I’m an old man. There’s no urge to go on and on. God help me, that’s the truth!

New York was beautiful, but it was a young and thrusting city. Exhilarating, bursting with life and enterprise. But for an old Englishman its pace was killing. It was time he was out of the race; it was time he sat by, and lived with his memories in peace.

He thought it was homely London he longed for, but he found that his thoughts were turning more and more often to the deep

peace of the English country, to lanes with daisy-spattered verges and over-arching trees, to village greens and benches at old inn doors. The countryman born comes back to the country at last.

When he told Mrs Byrne that he must go, she wept.

"Oh, Shrewsbury! Haven't we made you happy here?"

"I've been very happy," he said. "But I want to go home."

"Home?"

"Back to my own country."

"I suppose that's natural," she admitted. "Yes, I guess it is. I was raised in Indiana myself, and sometimes—oh well, as long as you're not going to another place in America I can bear it. But we'll never, never forget you, Shrewsbury, and all you've done for Harry and me. The apartment won't seem like home at all. I guess we might as well move away!"

They took him down to the boat. They filled his cabin with flowers and fruit. They gave him a hundred dollars and a gold cigarette case.

"And when we go to London," said Mrs Byrne, "you're the very, very first person we shall want to see."

He stood on deck to see the last of Manhattan sliding into her opal mist.

I love you, America! he said. You made a stranger love you. Good-bye!

TOMORROW

HE left his luggage at the station, and skirting the beds of wall-flowers, walked out through the wicket-gate. The May sun was shining on the new station buildings and the metalled road.

A new green bus stood waiting, the driver and conductor were sitting on the roadside wall. They had each a flower behind one ear and were eating sandwiches.

"Where do you go to?" he asked. "The village?"

"Okay. And all the way to Shrewsbury. Start in five minutes."
"Oh."

"Jump in, Dad. You a stranger here?"

Dad indeed!

"Stranger? I was born here!"

They set off at a bouncing pace. In a moment he began to think he had got to the wrong place, for a large estate of council houses opened out, and a row of modern shops, and on a corner stood a huge new hotel called The Coronation.

"What's this? . . . Where's this?" he cried to the conductor.

"Okay This is what they call the New Village. Old Village coming up in a minute. That's what you want. Hang on."

They came at last to the village green and the bus stopped alongside, outside the Bull. Yes, there was the old Bull, looking strangely shrunken and drowsy, for he had always remembered it as a fine bustling hostelry. Now it was just an insignificant village inn.

He got down and stood with his hands thrust deep into his pockets and his feet wide apart, while his eyes travelled round, finding here a familiar sight, and there a new one

That cottage . . . that row of elm trees . . . the same old forge. But there a modern shop-front. And on what used to be the vet.'s house a painted sign saying Greenside Private Hotel.

He noted that the fifteenth-century almshouse had been demolished, and in its place stood a clean little concrete building called 'Barclays Bank Tuesday, Thursday, Friday'.

This didn't seem so good, but when he swung about, there before him was the ancient church, secure in its six-hundred-year-old dignity, and the laburnums lacing themselves across the flagged path up to the door, and the old gilt-handed clock that was still a little fast to help worshippers to be in time. And there were the weathered tombstones, and it was all just as it had been when he was six years old, in his sailor suit, with Maggie clasping his hot little hand.

Nor had the Georgian rectory beyond the churchyard altered at all; it was as though the door might open at any minute and Mr Darling come sailing out in his cassock, or Mrs Darling with her white kid gloves on, using her prayer-book to shoo along the late-comers.

In spite of its touches of modernity, the old village still smiled a secret smile of confident peace. Though the green looked considerably smaller than the one on which he and the other boys used to play cricket sixty years ago—for then it had been an enormous spread of grassland, and now it was just a triangular patch—it was still a meeting-place for old cronies, and on the very same battered benches a few quiet people were sitting in the sun to chat and stare.

Tourlock! A good place, a sweet, unhurried place outside the stream of life. A place to come back to, a place that would welcome you without much fuss.

He knew without being told that the new people in the new council houses didn't bother with the old village much. They had their own shops, their own pub, and their bus that went 'all the way to Shrewsbury'.

But he must move on, there was something he must see. What had time done with the old lane?

There it was, opening up between the Post Office—enlarged out of all knowledge—and old Mrs Kent's cottage, which still had pink curtains and a white climbing rosebush over the porch. The old, narrow lane which nobody had bothered to improve; there it was with its ruts and its pot-holes and its chalky white dust.

In five minutes he was in the deep country, between budding hawthorn hedges, under arching branches just breaking into pale green leaf. The grass verges were bright, and daisies peeped out; the banks were starred with celandines. Sparrows and finches cheeped in the hedge, descendants of the ones whose nests he had sought so long ago. Come on! Come on! they cried. This is all right, you remember this. You won't be disappointed. We've kept it for you, just as you wanted to find it.

The little winding lane and the tilled fields on either side and the blue sky above and the blown white clouds!

It had seemed a very long lane when he was a small boy, but seeing how everything else had diminished he realised that after only another bend or two he would be home.

Oh dear! The word had slipped unbidden into his mind, and he was afraid. Dare he go on? Was he asking to be shocked, bewildered, hurt? Would the cottage still be there—or might he come upon a tumbled ruin, a stark chimney standing in a forest of nettles?

When he came to the last bend he could see a thread of mauve smoke going straight up into the sky; and suddenly there it was.

West Cottage. A green gate freshly painted; his father's own garden neatly tended and bright with polyanthus; the clean little windows, and the open door.

He hesitated and then went along the path, feeling as though he was in a dream. He stood under the porch and tapped at the side of the door.

A young woman appeared, breaking off for a moment her lilting song. She smiled. "Yes, what is it?"

"I just wondered—there used to be a family called Boan who lived here——"

"Boan?" She had gay blue eyes and there was a streak of flour on her cheek. "I don't recollect anybody of that name. We've been here nine years——"

"It was much longer ago than that. Silly of me to ask——"

"Not a bit. My dad might know. Step in, won't you?"

He went inside. The kitchen, the geraniums in the window, a small modern range where the old black-leaded grate with its steel facings used to be.

"Dad, there's a gentleman here asking about somebody of the name of Boan who used to live here."

"Good-day." The elderly man stood beside the table, pricking out seedlings. "I seem to have heard that name. There used to be—I can't rightly remember."

"It doesn't matter. I used to live in this cottage when I was a child."

They were both interested.

The young woman cried, "Well, I never! It's an old cottage, a nice old cottage. We're so happy here. Wouldn't you like to look round?"

He was already looking round. That was where his mother's chair always stood. Against that window his father had often leaned to pet his sun-warmed plants upon the sill. Through that door was the room where Maggie had died.

"Would you care to take a peep upstairs? You're welcome to."

"It's very kind of you, but—no, thank you. It's nice to see it so well cared for."

"Let me make you a cup of tea."

"Another time, perhaps. I must be getting on."

"Drop in any time you're about," the man said. "It'll be a pleasure."

He walked back to the village and sat down on the wooden bench outside the Bull. It was warm here in the sun, and there was a scent of flowers. A few bicycles glided by, and a carter stopped to water his horse at the trough.

The innkeeper himself came out.

"How do, sir. Nice day."

"What's your name?"

"Armsfield."

"Your grandfather kept this place."

"You knew him?"

"I remember him when I was a boy. I was wondering, do you know of anybody in the village who has a room to let? Somebody a bit—old-fashioned."

"That shouldn't be too hard to find. How long would it be for?"

"For—quite a long time perhaps. It would depend."

"There's Mrs Challen—the grey house, over there. I'm sure she——"

"Challen? I know that name."

"Been Challens here for donkey's years. Can I get you anything, sir?"

"Just a pint of old and mild."

The easy-going fellow called out, "Hey, Arthur? Pint of old and mild, out here." He held out his tobacco pouch. "Have a fill, sir?"

"That's very kind of you. It's a lovely spring day."

"It certainly is."

Edward packed his pipe slowly, lighted it, and drew. The smoke lingered pleasantly on the still, warm air.

"What's your name, sir, if I might ask?"

"My name's Boan. Eddie Boan."

"Boan, eh? Seems to ring a bell, but I just don't remember. But as I was saying, on a spring day like this, what matters? You've got the sun and somewhere to sit down, and a drink and a smoke. Why, just being alive is enough."

A bevy of sparrows came whirring down to the gravel, nearly at his feet. A thrush in a lilac bush gave a sweet and lively call.

Just being alive is enough.

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